The Children's Voice in Educational Research of Learning and Teaching

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This chapter introduces an innovative approach to child research. It focuses on the children's learning experience at (pre)school, in families and, in a broader view, in their living environment which also includes learning opportunities provided by other institutions. The intention is to give the children a voice in research, and let the researchers participate in the children's own subjective perspective, their thoughts, opinions, wants and wishes and phantasies. Participation of children in educational research will allow us to better refer to the children's needs in education. The chapter explains intentions and assumptions as well as the requirements of a multi-modal methodology to make children active participants in educational research.

Introduction

The recognition of childhood as a historical and cultural construction (Ariès 1975; de Mause 1980) paved the way for a new paradigm in the understanding of children. James & Prout's (1997) attempt to create a new sociology of childhood became important for all disciplines being engaged in research with and about children. The core of the new paradigm they proclaimed is that "children should be seen as active social agents" (Kehily 2009, p. 8).

In this context the new social studies of childhood discussed conceptions and theories of child and childhood: social changes in childhood, children's rights, the children as "actors in their own right" (Borgers, de Leeuw & Hox 2000, p. 61). They discussed the children's rights or the meaning of "generation" as a theoretical term in childhood theories and research (Honig 2009). The new understanding of childhood became the basis for ethnographical studies about the daily life of children, their social relationships or how children develop and create gender roles and behaviour.

With the new paradigm of childhood emerging in social sciences (Quvortrup et.al. 1994) the daily experience and the specific "world" and "culture" of children was now considered as a main source to learn about children. In the 1980s survey research started to consider children as relevant part of the population and began gaining empirical data about them. Qualitative research in childhood sociology expanded in the 1990s, especially by applying ethnographic methods. Researchers studied how children explore their environment, e.g. in large cities (Zeiher & Zeiher 1994). The construction of gender roles at school (Breidenstein & Kelle 1998) or the social relationships of primary school children (Krappmann & Oswald 1995; Petillon 1993) became research topics and contributed to the knowledge about children and their social behaviour. Not only in Germany but in an international context childhood studies developed more and more as a key area of research.

However, a genuine pedagogical approach to the children's perspective is still at a beginning (Schultheis 2005, Schultheis, Strobel-Eisele & Fuhr 2006; Hiebl, Pfrang & Schultheis 2013; Schultheis, Pfrang & Hiebl 2015; Schultheis & Hiebl 2016). Pedagogical child research is situated in the tradition of phenomenological pedagogical child studies by Jan M. Langeveld in the 1960s or later Max van Manen (1982) and Lippitz & Meyer-Drawe (1984). Those studies were close to the children's experience and needs, but today, regarding the standards of modern qualitative methodology their hermeneutical-phenomenological method can't be considered as sufficient and valid anymore.

In this chapter we introduce a concept for research of the children's perspective framed by a theoretical concept and the outline of a solid qualitative methodology for empirical research which children, based on a *multimodal combination* of research methods. This requires the adaption of

existent methods used in qualitative research with adults as well as the development of new methodological approaches.

Giving the children a voice in educational research and learning from the findings for educational praxis is the main objective of our research. Meanwhile there is a vast collection of data provided by studies like PISA, PIRLS, WorldVision and many more. These data don't tell much about the understanding, patterns of thinking and perceiving, moods and feelings of learning of children. But if we give children a voice in educational research and consider children as active learners who can tell us about their mental and emotional state, their sensitivities, ideas, and experiences we add a new resource to child and childhood research. This is not an easy undertaking and needs to develop new and creative research methods which help children tell us their insight view of what is happening in education. Especially research with younger children needs to consider other and complementary forms of childlike expression than only focusing on cognitive and verbal skills.

Pedagogical child research in this new understanding intends to examine the children's learning experiences and learning processes at school and, in a broader view, in their residential environment which also includes learning opportunities provided by other institutions. The focus lies on the subjective perspective of children trying to make them speak about their own experience and view of their learning processes.

In the following we describe basic intentions and assumptions of this innovative approach to child research. We explain the requirements for an adequate methodology and show examples for experimental methods.

The child's own perspective on education, learning and school

Child research in our understanding is based on genuine educational theories. However, there is also a reference to the accomplishments of childhood studies in sociology and developmental psychology. This means we reflect and refer to the state of the art in developmental psychology as well as to the sociological conceptions of child and childhood. However, our inquiry is not focused on childhood as a social phenomenon, on the social participation and roles that children play in society, nor do we want to explore their social relationships or social constructions – all these questions are in the scope of the sociology of childhood.

Reference to findings of developmental psychology means regarding the cognitive, social and emotional development of children. Children are endued with competencies at any stage of their development which enable them to have their own ways of interacting, of understanding and of interpreting their relationships, environment, and experiences.

Other than the sociology of childhood or psychology we act on the assumption that educational practices have ethical implications and that educational research needs to be grounded in anthropological and epistemic, but also in ethical reflection. Educational sciences have the responsibility to take care for the child's future and well-being and needs to contribute to the improvement of education in our society.

Educational child research in our understanding considers children as experts of their own learning processes. Asking children about their experiences with learning, teaching, achievement, social relationships, teachers, school as living environment and more is a rich source for our research. We grant children the capability of telling us about the insight of their learning experiences. Exploring the children's perspective can force to adapt and transform our adult constructions about children and childhood and relate them to the real needs and experience of children. Based on this we can improve instruction and teaching, education, and schools.

A pedagogical understanding of learning as basic condition to understand the children's perspective

Operational Theory of Education: Learning and demonstrating as basic operations in education

The understanding of learning and educating grounding our research approach has its fundament in the *Operational Theory of Education* developed by the German educationalist Klaus Prange (2005; 2011). Prange tempts to clarify the question what education really "is". On a first glance this question seems to be redundant since education is something we are all familiar with. There is education in families, at schools and in all institutions that care for learning and teaching of certain knowledge, capabilities and even the right behaviour and attitudes. On one hand, speaking of education is an easy endeavour – everybody seems to know what is meant by education. On the other hand, education appears as a blurry and theoretically unclear term making it difficult to define clear disciplinary boundaries for educational research. Therefore, we need to refer to a clear understanding of learning and education based on a genuine pedagogical theory. Especially in international comparative studies it is useful and necessary to share a common theoretical frame.

> *„Learning is the unknown in the pedagogical equation" (Prange 2005, p. 74)*

Klaus Prange's *Operational Theory of Education* clarifies what teachers or parents are doing when they educate. This comprehends teaching and all kinds of educational actions. All operations, actions, activities which aim to influence, and support learning are educational. Prange defines *education* as the relation between learning and educating.

The *Operational Theory of Education* refers to an understanding of learning which is based in anthropology and considers it as a natural human competence. The main thought is that learning is a voluntary act. An individual possesses the freedom to learn – learning is nothing that can be forced by education. Education can only provide support for learning: offering opportunities, showing ways and presenting topics for learning or arranging a learning environment. Learners can make use of this offer and develop own interests, attitudes, and gain knowledge related to the educational offer (Prange 1989, p. 183). The point of contact is where the learner needs support, because of not being able to proceed on their own. Learning itself is not visible and it is independent. Generally spoken learning aims on gaining:

- knowledge (e.g. mathematics, historical facts),
- capabilities (e.g. reading or playing the piano) and
- motivations and attitudes (e.g. punctuality, tolerance or politeness).

Learning happens through

- participating in day-to-day situations (e.g. in families),
- planned and organized instruction (e.g. at school, in a sports community),
- and individual reflection. This means learning processes need to be reflected on a meta level of thinking to develop independent judgment and an own point of view.

The freedom of learning constitutes the main uncertainty in education. Despite all efforts of teaching and supporting learning we can never be sure about the outcome and the results of learning. The learning act itself remains a "black box". Luhmann & Schorr (1982) name this the "deficit of technology" in education. We never can catch up completely with the learning of an individual.

However, we can develop appropriate methods of teaching and educating which support the educational intention and process. This is where the children's voice comes handy in educational research. The more knowledge we have about the children's needs, feelings, sensitivities and mental states, the better we can refer to it in our pedagogical actions, the more we can improve education in families, preschools, schools and other pedagogical institutions.

For our research of the children's perspective it is important to recognize the children's topics and subjective definitions in situations. The following table shows the categories from which themes in educational situations can derive. It also shows the concrete aspects that can get involved and become relevant in learning and educational situations. The categories describe the learning environment of children, the concrete and perceivable aspects children can experience by their capabilities of learning.
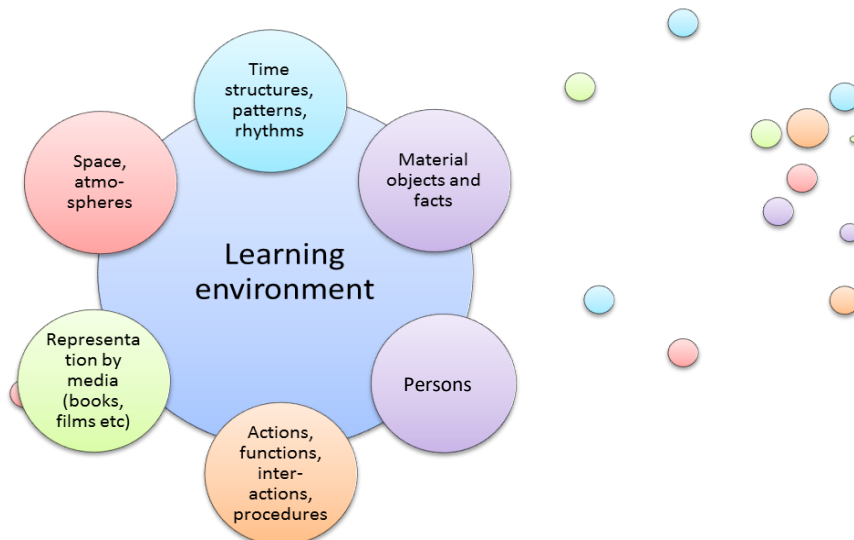
Fig. 1: Topology of the child's learning environment (Schultheis 2015)

There are time structures, patterns and rhythms children are experiencing from the first moment of their lives. One of the very first things in this context is that parents try to adapt the new-born baby to the day-night rhythm. Children learn about functions, atmospheres or the design of rooms, spaces of their environment. They are confronted with multiple material objects (e.g. things we use in our daily life, furniture, toys etc.) and facts they experience (e.g. it is not possible to stand on a ball; things drop to the ground because of gravity). Children encounter persons besides their parents and siblings: relatives, teachers, neighbours and many more. The relations to persons can be diffuse or specific (Parsons 1956, p 133f). The latter means they are characterized by roles, e.g. the doctor, the teachers. These relations are instrumental, not expressive, which means they concern the child's external relationships. In the daily life the child experiences a lot of actions, interactions and procedures which have a meaning and need to be understood. Media like books, films, stories which represent certain contents are also part of the child's concrete learning environment. All these topics can become virulent for the child and be part of learning and pedagogical situations. The child encounters these topics with the means of his body since learning for children has a strong bodily component. All the topics of the learning environment refer to the body related dimension of learning.

Corporeal embodied experience of children – the body as tool for learning

From the moment of birth children have the capability to learn. New-born babies have certain competencies at their disposal which enable them to interact with their environment, to adapt and to assimilate. Modern infant research shows that children are involved actively with their development from the very beginning of their lives. We speak of the "competent infant" (Dornes 1993) since new-born babies can already perceive their environment and show a variety of reactions. They can differentiate between people, identify the milk of their own mother, and recognize the face and voice of their mother. They can differentiate between creatures moving actively and objects being moved by somebody (Stern 2004, p. 12).

This natural competence to interact with the environment is the basic condition for learning. New-born babies have already available multiple patterns of action which enable them to grasp, to watch, to suck and to listen. There is a rudimental capability of eye-hand coordination. New-borns can respond sensitively to stimulations and are able to receive comfort (Keller 2004, p. 19). The research on linguistic development showed that babies have genetic conditions for language acquisition and at a very early stage they can have "proto-conversations" (Papousek & Papousek 1997) with the parents.

These few examples show that children use their *body as tool for learning* from the very first beginning. Cognitive development is based on the body experience: on our capability of perceiving since we only can comprehend something that is available for our senses. We need to have visual experience of abstract and cognitive contents. Children's learning is based on the means of the body; it takes place in direct contact with the topics of their concrete living environment which they can perceive, touch, sense, explore.

The Dutch pedagogue Martinus Jan Langeveld (1968) expressed the character of the child's experience by saying: the child "feels the world". He said the rolling and the round motivates the child to roll, the high to make something high and to bowl down, the empty to fill something in, the filled to empty it, the open to poke in, crawl in, walk through, the crying animates to cry, the laughing to laugh. Children's interaction with the world has a strong bodily component which means that learning happens dominantly by the means of the body. The development of the cognitive competences is based on the exercise and exploration of the body-related actions, interactions and experience with the child's concrete environment.

If we consider the body as fundamental principle and as our tool for learning, we will be able to approach the subjective experience and get a more "holistic perspective" on learning. In the German philosophy, especially in phenomenology there is the differentiation between "Leib" and "Körper". "Leib" means the body-related experience which is individual and subjective and refers to what we feel and sense internally. The term "Körper" is the physical, organic body and expresses that we can refer to our bodies in an objective way, for example use it as a tool, an instrument.
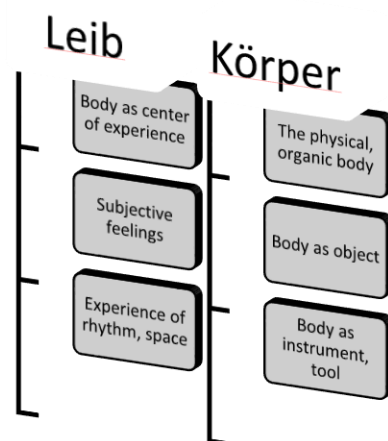

Fig. 2: Difference between the German terms for "body": "Leib" and "Körper" (Schultheis 2015)

If we want to work with children in research, we need to consider the fact of embodied learning. We need to deal with the problem that it is way more difficult for children than for adults to speak about body experience, feelings, body perception, to express emotions, needs and subjective experience. Therefore, the desideratum is to develop child-oriented research methods which allow us to reach these dimensions of experience. In regard of the methodology we need to build up on traditional methods in research with children but also try innovative methods to give children the means for letting us know about their sensitivities, feelings, body related and cognitive experience.

A multi-modal methodological approach to explore the children's perspective

John Hattie's analysis of 800 meta studies (Hattie 2013) showed how important it is that teachers perceive what the learners know and think. He pointed out that the children's perspective on learning

and the classroom often are an unknown field for the teaching persons (Hattie 2013, p. 284). Teachers, Hattie said, should try to see and understand learning processes "with the eyes of the students".

Most of studies in educational science try to measure learning progress and improving of achievement and reflect effect sizes of instruction. Hattie himself raises the question if such an evidence-based proceeding will be sufficient to understand learning and teaching from the perspective of the learners. Core element of this kind of research is always the "idea of an effective intervention" (Hattie 2013, p.300). It easily can happen to lose sight of aspects like the contents of teaching, the personal relationships between teachers and student, the influence of situational or biographical conditions. These are all factors with an influence on learning in the classroom. Hattie stresses that in this context it will be more and more important to combine quantitative and qualitative methods in a qualitative synthesis (ibid.).

Researching the non-filtered experience, the inner perspective and sensitivities of the learners in the classroom and other educational situations requires sensitive methods which not only examine the frequency of occurrence or the correlation of single variables. It is necessary to reflect the *complexity of educational settings* (Schultheis & Hiebl 2016, Chapter II). Here, qualitative research methods offer a wide range of options due to their openness, adaptability and flexibility. However, to transfer qualitative methods which are proved and tested with adults to child research, major adaptions as well as innovative approaches are necessary to motivate and help children to express and articulate their subjective perspective. It is required to consider the developmental state of the children, and it is important is to plan carefully the situation of data collection when children are involved into research. Children need an inspiring and motivating atmosphere making them feeling well and comfortable. Artificial, sterile and uncreative laboratory conditions won't serve this purpose. Furthermore, it is necessary to reflect the *epistemological problem* that the data produced by children are finally interpreted by adult researchers.

Further methodological reflexion is necessary to focus on the corporeal embodied experience of children and refer to the complexity of educational situations. The main question is about how to motivate children to tell the researcher about their sensitivities and their body-based experiences. Even adults experience difficulties in talking about embodied perceptions and miss the vocabulary to express feelings and sensitivities. Verbalizing corporeal experience requires to raise it to a cognitive level. We need to be aware how far children are capable to do so and to adapt the research methodology to this exigency. Research with children needs a wider understanding of "communication". We also need to consider the children's movement, their body reaction, their facial expression and gestures. Hence, multimethodological and multi-perspective approaches in child research meanwhile are obvious and acknowledged premises to catch up with the multiplicity and variety of the children's experience.

Our innovative approach to child research introduced in this chapter uses the term of *"multi-modal"* methodology, especially to express that it is necessary to combine non-verbal and verbal data collection methods to reveal a deeper level of the child's experience.

Triangulation is well discussed in the research with children (e.g. Grunert & Krüger 2006, p. 60ff). A classic example of the socio-scientific childhood research is Martha Muchow's study from 1935 about the "Lebensraum" of children growing up in big cities (Muchow 2012). She combined observations, non-reactive methods as diaries, daily documents as drawings and pictures, and conversations with children. Nowadays, we also use video filming, photographs, and different forms of interviews, e.g. narrative interviews, guided interviews or photo interviews (Heinzel 2012, p. 30), Bamler et al., p. 22). However, the transfer of those concepts of methodological triangulation to child research has its limits if we want to excavate the inner perspective of children and make them articulate their experiences and corporeal sensitivities.

As we stated earlier children's learning is highly determined by corporeal experiences. We need to accommodate the complexity of educational settings as well as consider those aspects and topics in the children's environment which get involved in the interaction between educators and learners (see

Fig. 1). It is necessary to regard the topics the attention is focused on as the content of educational situations. But also, aspects of time (rhythms, rituals, habits, spare time etc.), of space (classroom, playgrounds, school garden etc.), of social relationships (friendship, involvement of parents etc.) or representations by media (films, videos, virtual games, internet, books etc.) can play a significant role and must be considered.

Researching the children's voice needs to analyse the data against the background of all these aspects. This way we can develop a deeper understanding of their expressions, demonstrations and comments. The task is to experiment with appropriate methods to motivate the children to manifest themselves. To reach a deeper level of the children's experience we need to combine multiple modes of data collection as a *"multi-modal" methodological approach*. We use non-verbal creative expressions as a first step. In a second step we let the children reconstruct their experience by using their verbal skills. Therefore, it is necessary to develop data collection methods which allow creative-esthetical expressions of children. For the subsequent conversations/interviews we need to develop sensitive and adaptive forms and designs to motivate the children to tell us about their creative products.

Speaking about individual experiences, sensitivities, feelings is far too abstract and difficult for children. That's why we need to offer means to the children that allow the transformation into communication by using concrete actions, images, situations etc. The intention is to get a more holistic and deeper perspective of the children's thinking, acting, feeling, needing and sensing.

Mostly used in this kind of research are *thematic drawings* as a non-verbal, symbolic kind of expression. The children's drawings are used to initiate a conversation about the topic (Heinzel 1997, p. 402; Kuhn 2003). The children can speak freely about their drawings or they are interviewed by using central questions in a more structured conversation. It is important to know that the children's statements can differ from what is seen on the drawings (Driessnack 2005).

Using *topic-oriented drawings* or *narrative maps* as used by Lutz, Behnken & Zinnecker (1997) can make sense especially when the research project intends to find out about the children's perception and interaction with concrete elements of their environment (see fig. 1). Beyond that, this method can be used to find out about the children's wishes, desires and ideal conceptions, possibly connected with referring needs. Thematic drawings are spontaneous because most children love to draw and paint and express themselves in creative acts (Reiss 1996; 200; Schoppe 1991; Schuster 2010). We need to keep in mind that the situation of data collections can influence the results and needs careful planning. In a classroom and school context assessment and achievement can play a role, leading to conform products because the children don't dare to design their creations spontaneously and free.

A variation is *creative building* in a group. This could be painting a big picture together or making a collage related to a certain topic. It is recommended to use videography or record the children's activities and conversations. Appel (1993) described this method for a project about gender differences in a primary school class. Boys and girls each were building "their" city and reflected gender differences with the help or their creations.

Another method, developed in the 1990s by Wang & Burris (1997) for social scientific research is called *"photovoice"* as participatory photography. Its original purpose was to collect data about opinions and perspectives of disadvantaged social groups to give them a voice in respect of social relevant topics. The participants express their perspectives by using photographs. Darbyshire (2005, p. 429) adapted this method for child research. Children take photos of their living environment and write a short comment about the reasons for their choices. Wilk & Bacher (1994) let children take three positive and three negative motives of their environment. However, the participatory aspect didn't play a role in this study.

Further developments of these methods which are also called *"picturevoice"* is *"Create a Comic Project" (CCP)*, a methodological approach developed and tested by John Baird since 2008. Here, children create own comics to express themselves visually and narratively (Baird 2010). Meanwhile there are apps for tablets that easily can be used by children as well. This, as well as other tools, can be adapted and modified for the research approach presented in this chapter.

Other innovative methods to gain data focus on *musical and rhythmical expression* with music instruments or dance to reach the deep dimension of corporeal experience. These methods can either sensitise children for other, related methods for data collection or can be used for data collection as part of the multimodal methodological concept. There are first results in using Orff instruments. In this project children expressed their moods related to school situations. By using tone pitches, sound patterns, tone colours and rhythms children can express feelings and personal sensitivities. This can also be done with spontaneous and free use of colours for painting which can serve as motivation for conversations and interviews (Pfrang & Viehweger 2014). Puppets, dolls, playmobile figures or the Japanese narrative theatre KamiShibai can make it easier for children to express their feelings and individual experience and allow a better transformation into the language.

There is also potential in the adaption of methods fostering the inner attention or mindfulness. In the 1960s the American psychotherapist and philosopher Eugene T. Gendlin developed the focusing method which is used for example in therapy, in social work or in creative work processes. Focusing is based on a philosophical, a clinical and psychological background.[1] Gendlin speaks of the "felt sense", an experience that we all know but don't have a name for it (Gendlin 1993, p. 21). He also talks of "intuition" or "hunch". Gendlin thinks it is the "body" knowing the situation and being able to feel it directly (p. 22). This means, "felt sense" is a corporeal, bodily experience, e.g. an oppressive feeling in the chest or belly area which can result from situations, persons, tasks or problems. The intention is to find words for this embodied feeling and expatiate it in a continuing process. The therapist supports and accompanies this process without guiding too much.

In the middle of the 1970s the Dutch Marta Stapert applied Focusing the first time to children (Stapert 2003). Focusing in this understanding wants to help children to strengthen their mindfulness and get into relation to their emotions. With steps of guiding and response the children receive structured support to make the embodied experience accessible and bring it to awareness (Résibois-Kemp 2011). To support children in the process of symbolizing their experience techniques as painting, modelling, writing, drumming or roleplay are used (Balk & Markones 2005). The focusing method has potential for reaching the children's perception of the corporeal dimension of learning. Therefore, the adaption of this method for the methodology of our child research approach is a desire.

Fuhs (2012, p. 98) speaks of "symbolic interviews" when the focus lies on the nonverbal presentation of the child's subjective perspective. He says that the products created by children serve as starting point for speaking about their lives. The children's personal world manifests in their products (e.g. stories, bricolage, roleplays) - in a symbolic form. Interviews usually focus on memories which can be difficult for children. Against this background Fuhs (2012, p. 92ff) points out that interviews that are connected to a present or just passed situation are more effective. Furthermore, he says that sequential interviews, e.g. daily protocols, make it easier for children to remember connected activities. He states that there are meanwhile several promising interview forms which are applicable for research with children. However, the discussion and systematic variation is still not sufficient in his opinion (Fuhs 2012, p. 98).

There are also experiences with *group interviews* in child research. A study using group discussions with boys could gain extensive results exploring the construction of boys' identity with this method (Schultheis, Strobel-Eisele & Fuhr 2006).

In qualitative research with children letting the children compose small texts on their own has a longer tradition. Fatke (1994) points out that self-authored texts enable the children to express emotions, thoughts, memories and momentous events with words. Writing texts motivate because they allow to communicate the inner experience and can create connections with addressees in a real or fictive manner. Variations are diaries or storybooks which focus on the biographical experience. Experiments with diaries in the context of primary school show that children first need to become familiar with the

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[1] Find more information on the website of the Focusing Institute in Chicago: http://www.focusing.org.

method of diary writing. Otherwise, they would only number activities without referring to their inner perspective, their emotions and thoughts.

The multimodal combination of data collecting methods is promising. However, it is still a long way to develop a theoretically well-grounded, proved and solid methodology that allows us to get a deeper insight into the children's perspective on learning and teaching. Part of this should be the development of phenomenological categories that can structure and help analyse corporeal experience and, lead to a deeper understanding of the children's embodied experience in data evaluation.

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