

ISCI Conference 2022 “Children’s rights and opportunities in an unequal world: research, policy and intervention” in Gramado, Brazil

Submission of an abstract for an oral presentation

Title: Children’s ‘social skills’ in a digitalized everyday world

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There is a general assumption that *children would lose social skills by dealing with media and technology* (Downey and Gibbs 2020). In my PhD project I made this the starting point for both, a theoretical-historical discussion, and a qualitative empirical exploration. In the historical view it can be outlined that education – like it got important for western, modern societies – essentially implied the child as naturally social and open to being shaped and guided in relationships. So somehow the assumption above is not just about what happens to children, but rather what happens to the ways in which children can be approached or how they are available for education at all.

The paper focuses on the empirical study, which is driven by the question, ‘*what actually are children doing while dealing with digital media and technology?*’ and therefore explicitly not following the outlined assumption.

With an ethnographic approach I was two years observing and talking to children in an open leisure time facility in Berlin/Germany. Data also was conducted through the participatory method of ethnographic interviews using an internet-enabled laptop. In each conversation one or more 7–11 y o children participated and were asked to *show, things they do and/or like to show on the laptop*. Analytically, the concept of discursive practices (Fegter et al. 2015) was used, which allows exploring the way interaction, (digital) materiality, implicit knowledge, bodies, media content and verbal expression interrelate in social situations (Stalder 2018; Reckwitz 2003) and generate discourse.

Overall, it can be shown how children take care of one another, how they share perceptions and experiences, how they are being bodily connected and receptive as well as discussing values, norms and well-being in everyday practices that involve digital technologies and media.

Furthermore, the use of the Internet in interviews shows how in the relationship between the child and the researcher visibility and non-visibility is being negotiated and enacted. By observing one another while adding and removing content very quickly certain combinations of views, standpoints, and perceptions within the generational framework and orders of difference and exclusion are being tried out by the children. Yet, negotiating visibility as a playful act of allowing the researcher to watch and telling her to look away can also appear as joy, a sense of accomplishment, commonality, and self-expression in interview situations.

The results and methodological considerations shed light on children's abilities, agency, and prudence in dealing with media and technology. However, it can also be pointed out that certain vulnerable constellations do not only emerge from media and technology but rather are linked to an adult-centered perspective and a (structural) lack of sensitivity to certain forms of exclusion and marginalization that children experience. This empirical exploration provides an opportunity to discuss the conditions under which media and digital technologies can be used in educational work and research and how this would be beneficial. And finally, this approach reflects the need to challenge dominant discourses about children's alleged needs through the diverse and complex realities of children.