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Children and Adults in the Light of Phenomenological Concepts of M. Merleau-Ponty

Extended summary

The paper analyses the child-adult relationship in the context of phenomenological psychology and pedagogy of M. Merleau-Ponty. His research of the issues related to perception, language, inter-subjectivity, painting, politics, and history are an inspiration and incentive not only for philosophers, but also for the researchers of many other fields such as psychology, pedagogy, or environmental studies. His most important pedagogical insights were presented at the lectures on psychology and pedagogy that he gave at Sorbonne in the period 1949-1952 and these lectures were later published under the title *Child Psychology and Pedagogy*.

The paper focuses on the problems arising from the difficulty to understand children's world and the method that can be used to gain insights into the children's world. Within this context, we analysed the most relevant aspects of the phenomenological method and its application in the phenomenon of childhood, as well as its correlation with the most significant psychological theories of the mid-20th century – behaviourism and Gestalt Theory. The problem of a child-adult communication and the question of whether a child can have a perception of the world were also dealt with in the paper. In addition, the authors elaborated on Merleau-Ponty's criticism of Piaget's views.

Direct pedagogical implications of Merleau-Ponty's concepts are presented in the concluding section of the paper:

– “We hold that a child's consciousness is different from an adult's consciousness, not only in terms of its content, but also in terms of its organisation” (Merleau-Ponty, 2001: 171). Merleau-Ponty does not perceive children as uncultivated and unfinished adults. A child's con-

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sciousness and perception of the world are not less perfect than those of a grown-up person, they are merely different. In Piaget's opinion, a child is a cognitive alien in the world of grown-ups – "as it were, a child, just like a foreigner, thinks differently and speaks a foreign language" (Elkind, 1978: 286). In other words, adults perceive children as foreigners in a cognitive sense. An adult must acknowledge a child's perspective in two ways: by acknowledging the perspective of a child that the adult used to be and by an authentic and original understanding of the world from the child's perspective. The second perspective, which comes from inside, enables the adults (parents, preschool teachers, and primary school teachers) to present children's opinions and experiences in the classroom, as well as to enrich and transform such opinions and experiences and preserve an authentic expression of children as a permanent characteristic. In terms of a culture to which an individual belongs, such perspective contributes to the development of creative capacities of both the culture and the individual. It is essential to understand a child's view of the world from his/her perspective, and not from the perspective of the adults. This other perspective necessarily entails comparing children's opinions with the adults' opinions, while the adults' opinions are considered equal to scientific opinions. An adult person must understand a child's perspective before offering to that child other perspectives and opinions. The statement that "disagreement is the mother of science" here applies to both children and adults. A child cannot be an active agent of his/her development if the grown-ups do not take into consideration his/her opinions – worldviews, out-of-classroom experience, social and emotional and personal capacities (Ivić, Pešikan, Antić, 2002). Children and grown-ups have different experiential, spatial, and temporal perspectives. While an adult has both the experience of an adult person and a child (albeit a bit repressed and forgotten experiences from childhood), a child has only his/her own experience. The world of adults and the world of children are not the same concepts. Children and adults do not live in the same time zone. The adults perceive events in the perspective of the future, and the children perceive events only from the present standpoint. The interpretation of the phenomenological ideas indicates that preschool teachers, parents, and primary school teachers have to find a neutral language when considering different interpretations of the world. If they fail to do so, our insisting on scientific and philosophical concepts will result in the wrong perception of the uniqueness of the children's experience. This experience must have its place in the teaching process, not only as a naïve theory, but also as children's phenomenology of spirit.

A child-adult relationship is not linear. In their interaction, when an adult intends to exert influence on a child, the adult gets to know the child and also gains self-knowledge through the process of teaching the child. While changing the other, the adult learns about him/herself. This interaction occurs in a specific culture and at a specific time we all live in. Children's development cannot be viewed only as a biological development. Their development is not just a sequence of different stages of maturity. Cultural variations definitely entail the variations in the perceptions of the world. A cultural-historical context, the experience of the previous generations, and the culture of the epoch in which a child lives all have an influence on the child. According to these views, Merleau-Ponty is close to Vygotsky and his followers. His concepts make the perception of the nature of the learning process in institutional environment more complete. They are in line with the views of environmental psychology that stress the impor-

tance of the natural context which includes social and physical environment in which development and learning occur.

Keywords: Merleau-Ponty, pedagogy, psychology, children, adults.

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