Marginalized children: methodological and ethical issues in the history of education and childhood

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EDITORIAL

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Introduction

What do children have to do with the history of education? This might sound like a provoking question – of course children are relevant to the history of education, and of course education is essential for the constructions of childhoods. This special issue sets out to explore how marginalized children, as subjects within the field of history of education and childhood, challenge methodological and ethical considerations within historical research.

In an editorial in the 2004 History of Education, the then newly appointed editors of the journal Joyce Goodman and Jane Martin set out to define the field of history of education by reviewing ‘the concerns and concepts which have dominated both general issues and special issues in the 32 years since the journal was founded’.1 Their review revealed the broad empirical interests as well as the range of theoretical and methodological approaches that had been evident in the journal, but they also highlighted neglected topics. The linkage between family, education and work was identified as one such neglected thread of research.2 Interestingly enough, children or the history of childhood was not mentioned, as either a common or a neglected theme. If we examine the contents of the journal since then (2004–2015) we find 32 articles or book reviews that do incorporate the word ‘child’ in the title. This means that at least 4.5% of the publications in this journal encompass the word child in their titles. Analysing these 32 articles in more depth, we can detect a slightly increasing trend: in very recent years, children have been the focus of the articles more often than before. However, for the most part the contributions consist of book reviews.3 This suggests that children are no strangers to history of education, but neither are they at the centre of this field.

History of education or history of childhood?

The results of our survey are revealing concerning the academic fields defined as history of education and history of childhood. These two research fields have developed hand in hand, and are so close to one another that it is unclear whether we should talk about one shared field or two distinct fields of academic research. Traditionally, educational context has been central in histories about children and young people, in which the focus has been on topics like schooling or changing ideals of education; and vice versa – a lion’s share within history of education concerns the education of children.

3We conducted a database search on the website of History of Education on November 5, 2015, using the ISSN online number (1464–5130). A total of 714 articles (including book reviews, editorials) were published during the period 2004–2015. When modifying the search to include the word child* in the title, we got 32 hits. Of these, 21 have been published since 2012, of which 13 are book reviews and eight are articles. Changing the search word to girl* we got 19 hits, and to boy* three hits. As a comparison, between 2004 and 2015 12% of the articles in the journal Paedagogica Historica included child* in the title.
As Jeroen J. H. Dekker and Frank Simon show in their article about the history of the journal *Paedagogica Historica*, the formation of history of education as an academic field essentially concerns the formation of disciplinary institutions, such as journals, conferences and research networks. Both the journals *History of Education* and *Paedagogica Historica* are closely linked to longstanding societies and conferences promoting history of education. While there are several established journals within history of education, history of childhood remained a more marginal area of research until the establishment of the *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* (JHCY) in 2007. As Dekker and Simon point out, in the past 10 years the scope of the history of education field has increasingly broadened to include the history of childhood. This trend is also reflected in conferences like the *European Social Sciences History Conference*, which has an established network addressing both fields, called Education and Childhood.

Methodologically, we may assume history of education and history of childhood to be shared fields: both deal with similar questions concerning historical sources, methods of analysis and research-ethical problems. On the other hand, however, there are differences in approaches and research interests. The concept 'history of childhood' directs attention to children as the main subject of research, whereas 'history of education' suggests an approach in which childhood is viewed in the context of education. Some researchers identify themselves as historians of education, whereas others feel more comfortable with history of childhood. The latter concept is more commonly used in the discipline of history, whereas the concept of history of education is more common in pedagogics. The Swedish historian Bengt Sandin was one of the first to stress the interlinkage between history of childhood and history of education, studying how children and families themselves utilised the educational system as well as pointing to how the implementation of a school system and the reduction of child labour went hand in hand; the decreasing need for, and expanding regulations of, child labour created opportunities and a societal need to extend schooling, consequently further impacting the extent and nature of child labour. Schooling produced a new concept of childhood, in which it was ideally seen as an age period devoted to education and play, affecting family life and parenting; but, just as important, schooling was in turn influenced by children and their families.

Would this suggest that children are marginalised in the field of history of education? We would not agree with this; a brief analysis of the titles we have provided here does not do justice to a vivid and fluent field that publishes in several journals, conferences and books. However, we do believe history of childhood would have more to offer – not only for history of education, but for history in general. Incorporating children and their experiences and perspectives in the

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7Dekker and Simon, ‘Shaping the History of Education?’ 712.
10Within the field of history, children have become more ‘mainstream’ as topics during the past 20 years, although history of childhood can still be found in the margins of the discipline. See eg Joseph M. Hawes and Ray N. Hiner, ‘The History of Children (and Childhood) in the Twenty-First-Century’, *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 1, no. 1 (2008): 43–49. The growing interest in histories of childhood is reflected, for example, in some special issues in mainstream historical journals, eg the special issue ‘The Politics of History and the History of Politics’, in *American Indian Quarterly* 37, no. 1–2 (2013), focusing on the adoption of indigenous and aboriginal children by white families in former British settler colonies; the special issue ‘Growing up in the Shadow of the Second World War’ in *European Review of History* 22, no. 2 (2015).
study of history has the potential to challenge our understanding of past societies and ideas, as well as ethical and methodological considerations.

**Methodological tools for studying marginalised children**

All the articles in this special issue deal with children and young people who have been ‘marginalised’ in different ways. This means that they may have been marginalised in past societies, or in the historical sources and historical research. Sometimes both. Disabled children, children subjected to child protection actions, children subjected to abuse, and children living in remote rural areas represent different examples of marginalised children and young people, whose voices have seldom been heard in the mainstream histories. In the articles of this special issue, we seek to find different methodological tools for studying these children and the different institutional practices that have marginalised them. Second, we seek to identify methodological and ethical dilemmas that need to be taken into account when studying histories of children who have been living on the margins of past societies, or those who have left only fragmentary traces in the existing historical records and archives. These issues include, for example, practices related to naming and labelling historical subjects, problems of interpreting fragmentary sources produced by controlling authorities, and difficulties in aiming for child-centred perspectives.

By addressing these issues, we wish to create a discussion about the methodological and ethical premises of historical research in general. Methodological and ethical questions appear more clearly when studying marginalised people and delicate topics, but should be equally important for all aspects of history of education. For example, historians dealing with sources containing classified information are forced to think about and reflect on ethical issues such as those addressed in the articles by Adrian Bingham, Lucy Delap, Louise Jackson and Louise Settle, as well as by Kaisa Vehkalahti in this special issue, regardless of their topic. Concerns about ethics and the narration of history are essential for all historians, not only historians of education and childhood. Furthermore, the articles in this special issue show how methodological and ethical questions cut across geographical boundaries: researchers working in different countries face similar challenges. The themes of the articles encompass a wide temporal and geographical focus, covering issues related to Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day.

When exploring the hidden history of marginalised children and young people, historians often have to rely on fragmentary sources that offer only glimpses into the experiences of the children and young people themselves. Or, they have to combine multiple sources that shed light on the same issue, as Adrian Bingham, Lucy Delap, Louise Jackson and Louise Settle have done in their collaborative project aiming to chart social, legal and political responses to child sexual abuse in England and Wales across the twentieth century. Methodological and ethical concerns lay at the very heart of the project, as ‘sexual abuse’ is a fairly recent concept that previous categories of ‘sexual offence’ did not entirely encompass. The research team examined criminal justice statistics, newspaper press reports on cases that today could be termed child sexual abuse, as well as archival material. In their article they discuss the variety of methodological and ethical dilemmas they faced in the project, such as the gaps and silences in the archive, most problematically in relation to the voices and experiences of the survivors themselves. However, an examination of these textual traces allowed them to construct an archaeology of the past, and to uncover, identify and analyse those moments when knowledge of what we now term child sexual abuse broke the surface and entered the public sphere.

Gaps and silences in the archives are also the focus in the article by Kaisa Vehkalahti. Documents produced by controlling authorities and professionals are one possible source of information for historians studying marginalised groups of people who have left no written...
sources of their own in the public archives. Sometimes, the authoritative texts are the only sources available. What kinds of methodological dilemmas do researchers encounter when analysing documents such as police reports, medical statements or child protection case files? Vehkalahti discusses the possibilities and limitations involved with using administrative archives in the history of childhood, using as her example the Finnish child protection case files of the 1950s–1960s. While showing that archives created for administrative interests and purposes, like child welfare records, are shaped through and through by power relations, she acknowledges the importance of these archives.

Today, humanistic and social research in general is faced with tightening research-ethical regulation. It is not self-evident that historians will gain access to archival sources in their original, uncensored form. Sometimes, the ethical and methodological approaches can be in conflict. For example, the aim of finding the voices of the children of the past, microhistorical interest in the everyday life of ordinary people and marginalised groups, and a quest for intimate and personal stories from the past may be fundamentally in conflict with tightening ethical regulations set to protect the privacy of people of the past. What are the consequences if certain delicate topics or classified sources are closed to research, Vehkalahti asks? From the viewpoint of historical research, it is important to ask what kind of picture we would have of the past if it were not possible to discuss such delicate issues as child protection, family violence, abuse or discrimination – or if the discussion of these kinds of topics were possible only through statistical presentations. Would it be only joyful, happy and harmless stories of content middle-class families that history of childhood consisted of?

**Problematising voice, agency and truth in the history of education**

The aim of finding the ‘authentic’ voices of the children and young people has been an important one in childhood studies since the early 1990s emergence of the so-called new sociology of childhood, based on the view that ‘children should be seen as already social actors not beings in the process of becoming such’, as Allison James and Alan Prout have put it. The notion of children’s agency also became an important principle in historical studies. This has resulted in a range of important works in which children and young people have been introduced in history of childhood, recently also in history of education, in their own right rather than simply as passive objects of educational institutions, etc. However, opening historical perspectives to the agency of children of the past is more than challenging if the traces of their actions and the echoes of their voices have already disappeared, and there are no children available to interview or observe. What is often left for historians is adult memoirs and the scarce sources produced by children that have only occasionally been preserved in the archives.

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Criticism of over-simplistic notions of children’s agency has increased in recent years. There is a growing awareness that it is impossible, even for contemporaries, to grasp something we can claim to be ‘authentic’ or ‘genuine’, and that it is highly problematic to disclose the agency of children and young people without imposing certain kinds of agency upon them. This is a conversation in which historians of education and childhood need to be engaged, as Mona Gleason argues in her article. Based on the anthropologist David Lancy’s criticism of the ‘agency ideal’ for, amongst many things, its tendency to privilege certain groups of children and certain acts of agency (social and cultural rebellion against adults), Gleason shows how this ideal tends to obscure how children and young people have contributed to historical significance, even if they did so without leaving any obvious traces in historical sources. Instead of meeting a roadblock in fragmented sources that do not explicitly express children’s voices or agency, Gleason demonstrates – from letters between officials and the mother of a teenage girl admitted to the Department of Education’s Elementary Correspondence School in early twentieth-century British Columbia – that it is possible to advance further by reading between the lines of the primary sources from adults and employing secondary sources and one’s scholarly informed imagination. Questioning the stereotypical way of understanding children’s agency – as perspectives that are at odds with adults’ – she argues that other aspects of children’s agency can be envisaged. Gleason advocates a conceptualisation of children’s agency as relational and contextually complicated. This is an approach that takes into consideration categories other than binaries like ‘adult/child; good/bad; powerful/powerless’. Gleason elaborates on how age, gender, class, sexuality, ability, race, legitimacy and illegitimacy impact on relationships between children themselves, children and family members, and children and people outside the nuclear family.

This relates to another aspect of children’s voices and agency that is often overlooked, namely the fact that in certain contexts and relations children can exercise power that can be harmful, especially to other children. Child perpetrators form one of the themes addressed in Nell Musgrove’s article on a deadly case of abuse of a three-year-old boy entrusted to a foster home in Australia during the 1890s. This case of historical abuse is contrasted with a similar tragic death of a foster child in 2008, also in Australia. Both cases involved incidents that likely involved older children residing in the same household. Instead of holding individual children or adults accountable for what happened, Musgrove detects the systematic failures that allowed these tragedies. In the case of foster care, these systematic failures are unfortunately quite similar today to how they were in the 1890s: ‘shortages of foster homes, particularly for children considered “difficult to place”; unrealistic expectations placed on foster parents, and the difficulty of supervising the treatment of children within private homes’, she concludes.

Discussion concerning the possibilities for addressing the voices and agency of children is closely connected to the above-discussed issue of how to generate a coherent history out of fragments of the marginalised childhoods that rest in the archives. Ian Grosvenor has described this dilemma as a ‘struggle to bring together what belongs together’. He emphasises the role of the historian, concluding that ‘[i]t is the historian who selects, organises and then creates a narrative… It follows, therefore, that in the telling of stories, we have a responsibility as historians to “step forward from the shadows”’. Gary McCulloch and Ruth Watts, who edited the previous special issue on theory and methodology in History of Education, highlight ‘self-conscious
thinking’ as an important aspect of dealing with theory and methods simultaneously, essentially encouraging the historian to ‘step forward from the shadows’.17

In the current special issue, Annemieke van Drenth subscribes to such self-conscious thinking while re-reading sources she has analysed before. Scrutinising the files of children admitted to the ‘School for Idiots’ in The Hague in 1857–1873 with a new methodological approach – ‘praxeography’ – she shows how knowledge about ‘idiocy’ was produced as ‘true’ knowledge to legitimise the identification of vulnerable children as subjects in need of care and education. She also demonstrates how the diagnosis of ‘idiocy’ was dependent on not only medico-legal definitions but also on how educationists, physicians, parents and legal guardians negotiated the children’s problems in practice. In a similar vein, Johanna Sköld re-reads the Swedish truth commission report on historical institutional child abuse that she co-authored, comparing it with similar reports from other countries. She investigates how victims’ oral testimonies, records from child welfare agencies, and other kinds of sources are compiled into narratives about the past, in order to demonstrate how different epistemological approaches to ‘truth’ are employed in the reports.

Truth is a debated concept within history in general, but also within history of education, with vivid epistemological discussions taking place in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Previously, Richard Aldrich has analysed the debate between postmodernists, who argued that ‘history is a narrative discourse which is as much invented or imagined as found’ and postempiricists, who ‘continue to search after truth, even when they have come to terms with history’s processes of production’. He concluded that ‘Words, whether spoken or written, will never be able to recapture the events of the past in their entirety but the search for as accurate a representation as possible is as important for the historian in the lecture hall or journal article as for the judge and jury in the courtroom’.18

Van Drenth and Sköld address the concept of ‘truth’ in this special issue, albeit from different angles. Van Drenth applies a Foucauldian perspective, described by Derrick Armstrong as looking at ‘the ways in which knowledge is made and remade as a cultural practice of regulation rather than trying to resolve the “unsolvable” epistemological problem of what can be known about the world’.19 Van Drenth studies how ‘the will to know’ the inner worlds of children who did not develop like other children created knowledge that was seen to constitute ‘truth’ about them, which eventually formed the diagnosis of ‘idiocy’ that was imposed upon them. Hence, van Drenth scrutinises the processes in the nineteenth century that constituted ‘truths’ about children in the emerging field of child psychiatry. Sköld, in turn, contributes in a more general philosophical discussion about the different understandings of ‘truth’ in different disciplines, analysing how historical truth is defined by contemporary truth commissions. A few truth commissions, or inquiries, investigating historical abuse of children have been assisted by historians, which calls for an approach that highlights how we as contemporary historians narrate the history of children, childhood and education, and what consequences our narrations might have on the lives of people to whom the past is constantly present as childhood trauma. Hence, the ‘truth’ about the past is not only a matter of academic epistemological dilemmas but also has practical and political consequences.

The truth commissions and inquiries into historical child abuse constitute a fairly new phenomenon of the so-called politics of apology, which have previously been a political tool for coming to terms with gross violations of human rights in the past associated with

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dictatorship, colonialism, war crimes, the Holocaust, etc. Historians of education, children and childhood need to be aware of this development since it politicises our areas of research and puts marginalised children at the centre of concern. Since the 1990s institutions for out-of-home care, and foster care to a limited extent, have received political attention in at least 19 countries, due to accusations of abuse. In contrast to earlier times, when children’s accusations of abuse were conceptualised by the police as individual complaints, for example, institutional abuse has come to be identified as a social problem that needs to be investigated and acted upon. A common response for governments has been to establish truth commissions or inquiries, investigating the past through interviews or oral hearings with victims and other witnesses, as well as critically examining case records and other available data, as described by Sköld in her article. Even though the focus has been on institutions for children in out-of-home care, recent developments in Australia and the UK, as described by Bingham et al., indicate that schools as well as afternoon and sports clubs are also identified as sites of historical abuse.

These developments have implications for the concepts used, as they reflect identity struggles amongst various groups of formerly abused children – now adults, seeking redress and recognition. Those who have experienced historical child abuse are often labelled victims or survivors. However, the term ‘victim’ can have negative associations as it can imply weakness and passivity. But as Kjersti Ericsson has pointed out, vulnerability and weakness, together with the strength to claim victimhood, are prerequisites for ‘ideal victims’ to have their suffering publicly recognised and acted upon. The concept of the ‘survivor’, on the other hand, implies both the passage of time and the strength to overcome the experiences of abuse. In relation to historical child abuse, the survivor is an adult who was once a victim of child abuse. As Carol Brennan has put it, “‘Survivor’ status has to be earned, but the word can imply that one must not succumb but instead should triumph over adversity, an unwelcome burden for many.” In addition, not all victims survive, which furthermore complicates the term. ‘Care-leaver’ is yet another concept that has been used. This concept strictly focuses on former residents of out-of-home care, in contrast to ‘victim’ or ‘survivor’, which can be attributed to anyone who has suffered historical child abuse in any kind of institution. Since the most recent inquiries in Australia and the UK focus on sexual abuse that occurred in many types of institutions rather than only in out-of-home care, this might have consequences for the symbolic meanings of concepts so important in the struggle for identity amongst various groups.

As historians of education, children and childhood, we could ask how this attention to extra-familial institutional abuse shapes our interpretive frameworks, and what consequences this will have for children and the educational system in the future. In line with what Sköld and Bingham et al. investigate in their articles we could also contemplate what kind of historical

knowledge is required in these inquiries, as well as how and even whether historians should contribute.

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