

Infant simulator projects with disadvantaged girls: Marginalizing with the best of intentions?

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Background

Since the end of 2000 pedagogical practice in Germany addresses motherhood/parenthood with the help of computer-assisted infant simulators in school and out of school contexts – mostly with the implicit intention to act as a deterrent. The infant simulator is a computerized scale replica of an infant. Response times to crying, episodes of neglect and incorrect handling are recorded. The US-developed instrument has spread within Germany at a phenomenal rate and unites teachers and social workers in unusually cooperative agreement.

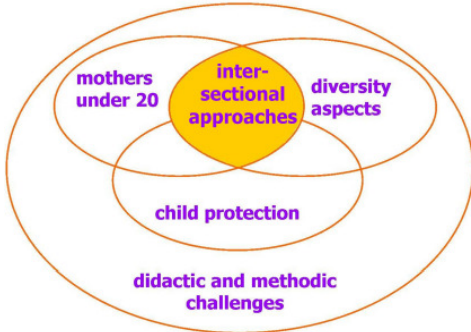
The independent research project whose data is presented here, was the first German-wide assessment of pedagogical practitioners work with infant simulators, focusing on aims, underlying concepts, the methodological basis, experiences and differentiations used.

Research Design

In seven group discussions, students agreed to speak about their expectations and experiences with regard to motherhood, life planning and the so-called "parenting internships". In addition, quantitative data was collected from disseminators with a questionnaire (N=90, return rate 42%), administered Germany-wide, concerning issues as in distribution, concepts, cooperation and intentions, supplemented with qualitative data from 27 problem-centered interviews.

Results

While practitioners hoped that the infant simulator would be able to support them in facing the pedagogical challenges arising at the intersection of „mothers under 20“, „diversity aspects“ and „child protection“, their statements, rather in contradiction to their proclaimed intentions and convictions, showed limitations and blind spots instead of the anticipated solutions.



Doing class/ doing ethnicity / doing gender

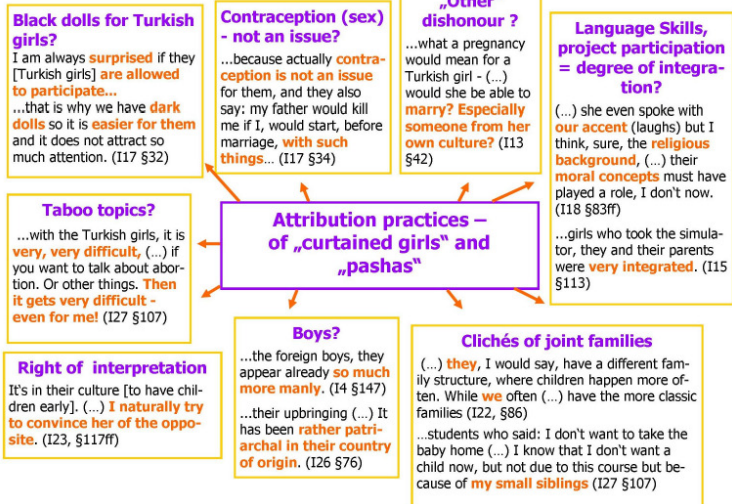


Even though practitioners state that infant simulator projects are relevant for **all** young people, the majority of participants are from low qualifying education streams geared towards vocational training, where young people with disadvantaged social and migration backgrounds are overrepresented. This is not reflected – often, migration backgrounds were only mentioned when specifically asked about in the interviews.

Girls are in focus (86%) – mostly without any gender-reflective elements to be found in the concepts, instead, 'traditional' gender roles are reinforced. Participating boys often attain an inflated status, achieving recognition and respect from participants and practitioners for their emotional handling of the dolls, balancing their ascribed 'macho' attitude. If they fail, parenthood 'is just not for them', while girls fail in their 'innate' mother roles. A discreditation of their self-image and at times systematic destruction of their self-efficacy takes place. Practitioners are unsure on how to react if girls – unexpectedly – handle their simulator caretaking duties well: in extreme cases they even resorted to manipulation of the simulator.

Professional helplessness

Contact with young people with migration backgrounds is characterized by blind spots and gaps, laced with diffuse images of „other“ cultures and stereotyping clichés.



'Rising rates' and the Media

Practitioners wrongly presume dramatically rising rates of 'teenage pregnancy' when they argue for the necessity of projects: an assumption supported by the media portrayal of the issue. Here, numbers seem to confirm their subjective perception of being faced with a high quantity of young mothers in their pedagogical practice. However, the percentage of underage mothers has remained stable for years. Several factors have contributed to this misconception:

Dramatically rising rates of „teenage pregnancy“ and „underage“ abortions?

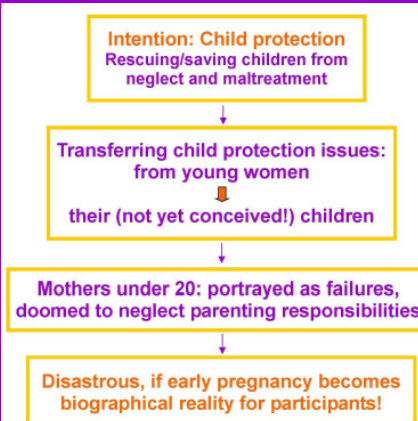
Changes in data collection of the Federal Statistical office

'Teenage Pregnancy'	Abortions
New method of calculating (year of birth vs. exact age) in 2000:	New legislation in reporting abortions in 1996:
'increase' through inclusion of more young women	high increase from 1995 to 1996
Stability of rates:	satisfactory degree of completeness of data: 2003/2004
Approx. 1% of all births are of underage mothers with falling tendencies!	2006: % of abortions: 5,3%: under 18, 23,3%: 20 to under 25

Why are rising rates presumed?

- time-frames for calculating rates: chosen to support thesis of „growing problem“
- instead of percentages, absolute numbers are utilized in debates

...with the best of intentions



A participant of the group discussion, herself a (proud and successful) young mother, says:

And now my friend is pregnant, and she is **soo depressed**, because of, because we did this baby project, and, hm, **now, in a sense, she does not want to have the child.** (...) Because she says: **"I can't do this, I do not want this, and I will lose my friends."** (...) She thinks she will be **locked up all her life** now and she is **totally depressed**. Because she had this thing [ID-Chip] on her arm. She has been **totally scared off**. Many would say now: "Oh, it was just a doll, it is different with real children." You handle it differently then, automatically you do not say: the baby is now one week old, please look after it. You don't do that because you have maternal feelings. **But she is scared.** (GD II2, 1108-1125)

Conclusion

The findings show – on many levels – a problematic and not at all recommendable simulation practice, which is strongly advised against. The professional challenge lies in addressing the complex topics of sexuality, love, motherhood/fatherhood and plans for the future, valuing the symbolic beliefs of young people, in a way that suffices intersectional standards.

References

Spies, Anke (2008): Zwischen Kinderwunsch und Kinderschutz. Babysimulatoren in der pädagogischen Praxis. Wiesbaden.

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