How and why should children eat fruit and vegetables? Ethnographic insights into diverse body pedagogies

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ABSTRACT
Much recent scholarship in the field of sociology of childhood has analyzed the disciplinary and regulatory strategies for governing children’s bodies in the name of “health” and “life” in North/Western Europe, North America, and Australia. These analyses problematize how formal and informal pedagogies are shaped by biomedical knowledge, popular media images, and neoliberal agendas in ways not always for the benefit of the children in question. Little research, however, has explored the body pedagogies developed within grass-roots movements concerned with children’s health and well-being; furthermore, little research has explored these topics outside the North American or European space. Following a comparative ethnographic approach, I explore the differences in how and why children eat fruit and vegetables in a) public kindergartens and b) allotment gardens in Berlin, Germany, as well as in c) Landless Workers’ settlements in Espírito Santo, Brazil. The qualitative analysis reveals that biopedagogical concerns often intermingle with ecological as well as broader societal issues, depending on the concrete context in question. This, in turn, poses new questions concerning our understandings of “biopower” and “biopolitics.”

1. Introduction: a Halloween buffet with a great deal of fruits and vegetables

It is Friday, and two teachers and I are preparing the celebration of Halloween in a German public kindergarten in the formerly West-Berlin neighborhood of Wedding. The twenty children aged 3 and 4 for whom the celebration is being organized are taking their midday naps in a nearby room. I have already been doing fieldwork for two months, participating in all possible activities, and everybody is quite familiar with my presence. We quickly place pumpkins and other Halloween decorations in the classroom, then we cover the windows with paper and dim the lights so that the atmosphere is spooky. The young children are still sleeping and I continue decorating the classroom while the teachers prepare large buffets on three tables. For the first time in their teaching careers they do not put soft drinks on the table, but fruit tea; next to the chips, chocolate products, and cookies they place a great deal of fruit and vegetables. The children paint spooky faces on the tangerines, cut the apples in funny ways, and decorate the buffets in such a way that grapes, carrots, cucumbers, and tomatoes fit into the “Halloween atmosphere.” I am positively impressed by their commitment and devotion.

When the children wake up, they put on costumes and masks they have brought from home or they have their faces painted by the teachers. The party slowly begins: besides dancing, chasing each other around, and making funny faces, the celebration involves a lot of eating and drinking. The children try the food without making a clear distinction between the available sweets, on the one hand, and the available fruit and vegetables, on the other. The children’s concerns are instead practical: a carrot is too hard to mince, while a chocolate muffin is too big to place in one’s mouth; peeling a tangerine is difficult, but so is opening a package of candies. And when Jan or Tine, for example, make a funny face and a prolonged “mhmm” or “eugh” to indicate their enjoyment or disgust of a particular food, in most cases they are trying to attract attention or respond to a funny face or sound of another child, independently of whether or not the food in question is indeed more or less sweet, sour, or particular in any other way. (Fieldnotes by the author)
"healthy." There does not seem to be a significant difference between “fruit” and “vegetables,” although a clear opposition is made between “healthy” fruit or vegetables and all other snacks—salty or sweet—which are “unhealthy.” Fruit and vegetables are considered to be beneficial for the children’s “health,” as opposed to sweets and chips considered to contain high amounts of calories and fat and thus be “unhealthy.”

Indeed, a wide range of research in epidemiology, genetics, epigenetics, evolutionary theory, and cardiovascular health have recently drawn attention to the so-called “obesity epidemic”: although there is little agreement in regard to the causes of the so-called “metabolic syndrome,” a common topos among many scientists, politicians, health insurance companies, and staff working in prevention promotion is that the “obesity epidemic” can be treated most effectively by prevention practices: the earlier such practices begin, the better (for an overview, see: Döring and Kollek, 2010; Niewöhner et al., 2011).

In this frame, teachers are not only responsible for the education, but also for the health of young children. They were specially trained for these additional duties a few months before my fieldwork. The children are seen as a population “at risk of obesity.” This is, on the one hand, quite a new trend, but on the other hand implies that the children are citizens of a state that has historically taken responsibility for its population’s “health” as well as the children’s “well-being.” Germany is indeed one of the few countries in the world with a long history in social welfare and the public prevention of chronic diseases. Furthermore, the public kindergartens in Germany are well funded and adequately cover the demand for childcare and early education throughout the country. In this context, scenes such as the one presented above are usual.

A very interesting mixture of biomedicine and pedagogy is at stake: as a state institution, the kindergarten is expected to offset the negative effects of an industrialized way of life by creating a different setting: fruit is placed next to sweet things on the table as well as next to or, if possible, above sweet things on the children’s lists of favorite foods. As the teachers explained to me, one way of achieving this is by placing a funny cut apple or a tangerine painted to look like a terrifying face on the Halloween buffet. As I have elsewhere explained (Kontopodis, 2012a, 2013b), decoration is important and goes together with certain beliefs about what children are and what children like. These beliefs in turn go together with pedagogical ideals that shape what a “good teacher” is. By repeating this kind of setting—according to relevant theories—if all goes well, institutional practices will at some point no longer be needed, and children will be used to eating more fruit and less sweets for the rest of their lives. This also implies a certain developmental temporality and specific developmental-psychological knowledge (Kontopodis, 2013a).

In order for this setting to work, fruit and vegetables are taken out of what could be seen as their “natural environment”: they have most probably been kept in refrigerators for a few days and transferred from the German or South European countryside before they reach the buffet of a preschool in West Berlin. Furthermore, fruit and vegetables are provided free of charge in the public kindergartens, and teachers are paid to spend time to cut them and decorate the buffet with them as appropriate for the situation.

2. Body pedagogies, biopedagogies & children at risk

Although a Halloween buffet with a great deal of fruit and vegetables may look beneficial for any child, much scholarship in the field of sociology of childhood has recently problematized the ways in which formal and informal pedagogies are shaped by biomedical knowledge, popular media beauty ideals, and neoliberal agendas in North/Western Europe, North America, and Australia/New Zealand—although not always to the benefit of the children in question. John Evans and his colleagues distinguish four fat fabrications in the discourse of the so-called “obesity epidemic”: a) there is a crisis; b) the crisis has to be solved; c) health is the individual’s responsibility, only one’s self is to blame for obesity; and d) an outward display of compliance to perfection ideals must be observed (Evans et al., 2008b).

In this context, the current emphasis on “health,” “fitness,” and “obesity” prevention is interpreted as a more general trend reflecting the importance of performance and individual success in the educational system of developed Western countries (Evans and Davies, 2004; Gingras, 2009; Rich and Evans, 2005, 2008). The danger of excluding overweight children is high, and a growing pressure is felt by boys and especially girls to be slim in order to feel accepted at school (Colls and Evans, 2009; Evans et al., 2009; Evans et al., 2008a; Evans et al., 2004; Guthman, 2009; Rawlins, 2008).

A series of studies have recently explored such “perfection-codes” (Evans et al., 2004) and their modalities, so-called “body pedagogies” (Evans et al., 2008a; Rich and Evans, 2009), “body pedagogies” (Shilling, 2008), or “biopedagogies” (Wright and Harwood, 2008):

Body pedagogies are any conscious activity [under]taken by people, organisations or the state, that are designed to enhance individuals’ understandings of their own and others’ corporeality. (Evans et al., 2008b, p. 17)

While “body pedagogies” is a general term that would appear to apply to any setting and era, Jan Wright suggests drawing on Foucault’s concept of biopower to conceive of the body as inextricably bound up with life (or bios). This enables us to understand biopedagogies as those disciplinary and regulatory strategies that enable the governing of bodies in the name of health and life. (Wright, 2008, p. 8, italics mine)

According to Michel Foucault, biopower refers to the modern nation state’s “numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations,” such as public health, the regulation of heredity, and risk regulation (Foucault, 1979/1976, p. 140). Indeed, Foucault’s analysis of biopower and biopolitcs seems particularly relevant when referring to children at a time in which pedagogy meets biomedical science, children are “at risk” (cf. Burrows and Wright, 2004, pp. 85–86), and teachers have become “health experts” (cf. Evans and Davies, 2004, p. 39). By reviewing the literature referred to above, one could form the impression that biopedagogies are quite consistent.

Little research has however explored questions concerning children’s “health” and body pedagogies within spaces that are not directly organized or controlled by the state. Furthermore, little research on such topics has taken place outside North America, North/Western Europe, or Australia. It remains an open question as to what form body pedagogies take within grass-roots movements concerned with children’s well-being, and whether concepts such as “biopolitics” or “biopedagogies” would still be valid when referring to spaces not directly organized or controlled by the state and/or non-Western contexts.

This study explores these questions by contrasting explorative ethnographic materials about how and why children eat fruit and vegetables in state-run institutions and within grass-roots movements in European and non-European settings. Contexts that would be too different from the European frame of reference—for example extreme poverty or indigenous ontologies of health and the body—have however been left out.
3. Research fields, data collection, and analysis

With the above-mentioned questions in mind, I searched for settings that were well-known in their respective local contexts because they had developed specific concerns about children’s eating, health/well-being, and/or ecology. After a first explorative phase of mapping the broader research field, my research concentrated on a) German kindergartens/preschools such as the one referred to in the introduction; b) allotment gardens in Berlin; and c) one of the most radical and effective agro-ecological movements in the world: the Landless Rural Workers’ Movement (Movimento Sem Terra) in Espírito Santo, Brazil. In all cases, I focused on practices that concerned children and childhood, and which were quite established in the settings in question. I also explored broader contexts and their history, often in collaboration with colleagues active in these research fields for two or three decades. The names of the preschools and concrete locations have not been revealed in order to ensure anonymity.

I first gained access to local schools and preschools, i.e. kindergartens, by explaining that I was interested in their specific concerns about children’s eating, health, and/or ecology. Through the teachers I later gained some access to families, local communities, or other relevant spaces. In general, my access was relatively uncomplicated because I was a university researcher (which implies high status), and at the same time had significant experience and interest in working with children. This was important in terms of practicalities and for gaining the trust of teachers, parents, and community members, as well as in terms of communicating with the children.

In Brazil, my access was facilitated through local colleagues who were familiar with the research fields in question. I spoke the local languages (German and Brazilian Portuguese) fluently. My research followed the ethical guidelines and written and unwritten laws for research with young children in Germany and in Brazil: the optional and informed participation of the children; explicit agreement of the adult caretakers, the teachers, and the school authorities; the maintenance of anonymity; information sensitivity; and attendance to the concerns of the research participants.

The research combined a) phases of intensive fieldwork, during which I spent everyday at the research locations; and b) periods of looser contact to the fields, during which I participated in important events, visited other similar places nearby for purposes of contrast and contextualization, analyzed and evaluated the data collected, discussed my findings and further questions with research participants, and scheduled the next intensive research phases in order to pursue further research questions. The research began in 2007 and continued for three years, with the intensive research phases counting up to 9 months in total (i.e. 3 months per year).

No particular sampling technique was applied: all children aged 3–7 in the gardens and rural areas in question participated in the research, except if they or their parents did not wish to join. The same was the case in the urban preschools in question (if the preschool was very big, then mostly children from one or two classes participated). The child’s age, gender, family income, ethnicity as well as the profession and the educational background of the child’s parents were documented and taken into consideration when relevant for the analysis. The total number of children who participated in the research was 43 in Brazil and 46 in Germany. Two preschool teachers or carers per setting and a broader number of older siblings, parents, neighbors, community members, coordinators, and activists were also involved in the research. For purposes of contrast and contextualization, I paid short research visits to three more preschools as well as other community settings in each case.

My research followed ethnographic research methodology and involved participatory observation and video recordings as well as expert interviews. Following newly developed approaches in child research, I also combined ethnography with activities where the young children were explicitly equal participants in constructing the research itself, such as theater improvisation and photography by the children (Christensen and James, 2008). My participant observation included playful interaction with the children, taking field notes, and, if applicable, the assistance of the children and staff with their tasks. I encouraged the children to express themselves about the research issues in their own words. I also led an activity in the kindergarten in which the children were asked to perform how they eat in their everyday lives in the kindergarten and in other situations (theater improvisation). In order to examine the children’s everyday practices from the perspective of their educators, participant observation was supplemented with expert interviews with kindergarten staff and parents/guardians (Gläser and Laudel, 2004).

Following a comparative ethnographic approach (Gingrich and Fox, 2002), I first analyzed the everyday lives of young children in each specific setting and then analyzed and contrasted the settings to each other. In a second step, I searched for illustrative examples such as the Halloween celebration, which could summarize the various analytical categories and differences documented in the previous phase of the analysis. I will not present any further materials from the German preschools, but in the following will instead concentrate on the other investigated contexts.

4. Eating berries in allotment gardens in Berlin, Germany

I am with Moritz, a three-and-a-half-year-old boy, and his parents. They got to know me a few weeks ago at the kindergarten where most of my research on children and food has taken place. We arrive at an area with allotment gardens in Berlin Wedding (Germany) after a 10-min drive from their home, which was very near the kindergarten referred to in the previous section. Moritz is excited by my presence, takes me by the hand, and as soon as his father unlocks the garden door, runs into the garden and full of enthusiasm shows me the three different kinds of berries that are there and ready to eat. Neither Moritz nor I am familiar with the German names of the berries, but it is not difficult to tell that they are black, blue, and red berries. We are about to try the black ones when Moritz’s mother comes to us with a bowl where we can put the berries in order to wash them with water before eating them. I help collect a few berries with Moritz and then we go to wash them while quickly trying the ripest ones. Moritz smiles happily, looking at my face to see my reaction. I like the berries very much and cannot help comparing them to the less-tasty fruit I usually buy from the supermarket in Berlin. (Fieldnotes by the author)

Eating berries in allotment gardens in Berlin is very different from eating fruit and vegetables inside the preschool of the introductory ethnographic scene. Young children are not primarily seen as bodies that need certain nutrients: they move freely in the garden, discover and learn, ask questions, acquire knowledge about the cultivated plants and fruits, observe them growing, and participate in a playful way in gardening, in collecting fruits and in eating them because—according to their parents—this is the “natural” way for children to grow up. Berries in turn are “attractive” without any specific artificial decoration, and are not directly juxtaposed to sweets or any other type of “unhealthy” food. In contrast, fruit and vegetables in the introductory ethnographic
scene were cut in funny ways and placed carefully within the broader Halloween decoration.

But what exactly is perceived as “natural” in an urban allotment garden? Even if no public servants are directly visible, quite a few institutional actors and much work is needed behind the scenes for these “natural spaces” to be created and maintained. In response to local grass-roots movements and increased concerns about “ecology,” “urban architecture,” and “food availability” in the West Berlin of the 60s and 70s, the municipality of Berlin made whole areas inside the city available for allotment gardening. These gardens were given on cheap life-long contracts to people who were not rich enough to own a house with a garden; there is a regional unity that is responsible for this whole process, as well as for the infrastructure of allotment gardens—which are quite numerous in Berlin, in comparison to other European cities.

Berlin childhood is associated with such gardens: parents hiding and children looking for chocolate eggs in the garden for Easter; collecting berries and making jam for the whole year; observing the plants and trees growing while playing around in the remaining spaces were a few of the garden activities that children and parents invited me to participate in during my ethnographic research. In these allotment gardens, children are enacted as a population in need of protection by a state that controls the real-estate interest groups and guarantees “natural spaces” within the city area. At the same time, they are enacted as unique person-bodies who develop by experiencing a great variety of colors, tastes, odors, and shapes of fruits and other natural products throughout the four seasons in their “natural space.” Some of these experiences may entail bodily effort and tiring tasks as well as pleasure. Parents and state representatives should, according to this logic, do their best to enable young children to grow up “naturally,” even if the children grow up in a big city like Berlin. The pedagogic philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his later German versions—the so-called “Erlebnispädagogik” (experiential pedagogy) and “Freikörperkultur” (free body culture)—is echoed here (Baig-Schneider, 2012; Freudenstein, 2005; Lang and Rehm, 2010).

Fruit and vegetables in this context take all possible forms: they can be fresh and collected from the trees, they can become jam or salad. What underlies all these practices is not a rigid biomedical concept of “physical health,” but a rather holistic understanding of “natural development”: developing long-lasting relationships to “nature” is considered to be beneficial for everybody and especially for contemporary young children. They need a happy, healthy, and stimulating environment in order to grow up protected from the negative effects of industrialized ways of life.

5. Landless children in Espírito Santo, Brazil

(A) I am at my hosts’ yard with Raquel, their six-and-a-half-year-old daughter. She is surprised that I do not know which tree produces which fruit or what their names are. Raquel shows me the mango tree, the acerola (i.e. wild crape myrtle) tree, and the coconut tree and explains to me in full detail which tree bears what and in what season. It is February and only a few coconuts still hang on the coconut tree—the other trees are out of season. I am surprised by her knowledge and her interest in this kind of information. I tell her this, and she laughs proudly. She then takes a special knife to cut two coconuts from the tree and open them, something I could not have done myself. I am afraid that she will hurt herself and tell her so, she laughs at me and soon gives me a coconut so that I can try its refreshing juice. I accept her gift with gratitude. Raquel’s father comes to us and asks me if I like the coconut juice. He then explains to me that when they first settled here, 18 years ago, there were no trees. It took him and the other Landless Rural Workers a lot of work to build irrigation systems and cultivate everything, and he cannot believe in his eyes when he sees how everything is now so green. He says that he is happy that he can procure all kinds of food he never had as a child for his daughter and son. Now they produce fruit throughout the year, and their small-scale production is much better than large-scale production in terms of biodiversity. (Fieldnotes by the author)

(B) A few children aged four to seven years old and I are walking our way from the local (pre)school to the children’s homes. Nobody is in any particular hurry, the weather is hot and it is not raining. The children chase each other back and forth, we stop at a location with a nice view to see an artificial lake, and then—as usual—we stop at the chestnut tree and the older children try to reach the chestnuts, open them, and share their contents with everybody. Given that this happens almost every day, there are not a lot of chestnuts easy to reach, and Fernanda suggests taking a longer way this time and stopping at a cacao tree. The other older children are enthusiastic—also because they want to treat me to something special—while the younger children just follow without expressing any particular disposition. When we reach the tree a few minutes later, we realize that the cacao fruits are not yet ripe. Still, eating at least three or four of them sounds like a good idea. João, who is around seven years old, tries to reach the most mature fruits and then to open them. This is not that easy, but João knows how to do it. Fernanda helps him, and as soon as the first cacao fruit is open, everybody tries to get a little bit of the content and taste. João says that the fruit is not really ripe yet, but it still tastes good. Fernanda explains to me what and how I am supposed to eat, I like the taste and wait for my turn to take more. (Fieldnotes by the author)

If one compares these scenes with the scene from the Berlin allotment gardens, the similarity is striking. And yet there is a significant difference: whether the city population has enough fruit to eat in Berlin does not depend on the small gardening projects, but on the global food market. Fruit is imported from all over the world, prices are usually affordable even for people of low economic status, and the availability of fruit is quite self-evident in Berlin. In this context, allotment gardens entail a significant pedagogical dimension, as explained in the previous section, but they are not essential for survival.

In Brazil, whether the city population has enough fruit to eat also depends on the market, but in the other way round than in Berlin: Since the very beginning of colonialism, much land has been used for producing export goods (eucalyptus trees, sugar, or coffee) for international markets instead of food for the locals. Even the grain, meat, or fruit produced there is owned by the few (colonial) landlords and exported for profit. As a result, local populations (including children) have often been undernourished; in this context, growing up “healthy” means first of all to have sufficient food. Fruit—in contrast to bread or milk—can even be considered a luxury product.

For 30 years now, a whole movement has attempted to reverse this situation: the continuous occupations by landless workers of the land owned by colonial landlords, their displacements by the local police, encampments, settlements, resettlements, and a series of demonstrations and violent confrontations with police have constituted the so-called Landless Workers’ Movement (“Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra” or “MST”). This movement is considered the major counter-hegemonic movement of Brazil and is one of the most important radical social movements of Latin America, with an estimated 1.5 million landless members of all
possible ages and ethnic-racial groups organized across the country (Karriem, 2009).

In the special issue of the Landless Workers’ newspaper commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Landless Movement, one can read a heroic narrative of the movement’s history. Major events include the 19 Landless Workers killed and 69 wounded by police while they were blocking a state road in Pará on April 17, 1996 (Eldorado dos Carajás massacre), or the 13,000 Landless Workers who marched from Goiânia to Brasília (more than 200 km) in 2005 (Jornal dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, 2009). The main quest of the Landless Movement has been a Brazilian agrarian reform, i.e. a just re-distribution of all Brazilian lands. This goal remains unattained.

Fruit and vegetables in this frame are something different than what they were in the previous examples: in order to grow all possible fruits and vegetables and have them be accessible to the local population, the Landless Workers have practiced so-called agroecology as opposed to agribusiness. Agribusiness refers to the export and profit-oriented mode of agricultural production of eucalyptus, sugar, coffee, and other products not necessarily meant for eating. Agroecology instead means that a modern family (not a large “medieval family” or any other group constellation) produces high-quality organic food for its own needs: rice, beans, chicken, fruit, and vegetables. A great variety of fruits and vegetables are cultivated, so that at least one type is available in each period of the year. At another location, the Landless Workers (either individually or collectively) cultivate coffee, allspice, or other products in order to sell them (cf. Kontopodis, 2013c).

Fresh and plentiful fruits in this context are also the “fruits of the rebellion,” i.e. fruit more than any other food symbolizes the ongoing struggle to reverse the history of colonialism:

Parabéns em Movimento

Parabéns aos seus amigos e de seu povo sem terra! Pelos 25 anos de história. Viva a luta pela terra (2x)! Quando a bandeira vermelha subiu, o latifúndio tremeu! Quando uma parte do campo floresceu a Mãe Terra agradeceu! Dignidade rompeu a porta! sorriso em assentamento! Viva e reviva MST, parabéns em Movimento! (2x) [...]! Quando a bandeira vermelha subiu, o sonho aconteceu! Colhendo os frutos da rebeldia, um novo ser renasceu! Seguindo em marcha abre caminhos rumo ao novo amanhecer! São 25 anos de luta, viva o MST! [...]!

Congratulations to the Movement

Congratulations from your friends and from your landless people! For 25 years of history. Long live the struggle for land! [...] When the red flag went up and the landlords trembled! When one part of the field bloomed the Mother Earth was thankful! Dignity broke in and the settlement smiled! Live and relive MST, congratulations to the Movement! [...]! When the red flag went up, the dream came! Reaping the fruits of the rebellion, a new being was reborn! Keeping on protesting opens up paths towards a new dawn! 25 years of struggle, Long live the MST! [...]!

(Song by an anonymous authors’ collective, published by the Cultural Sector of the Landless Rural Workers’ Movement on the occasion of its 25th anniversary (Setor de Cultura do MST, 2009, p. 16), translation by the author.)

Indeed, it took about 25 years of “struggle for land” for the Landless Workers’ claims to be legally accepted. There are still a lot of open issues and questions regarding their legal status (Kontopodis et al., in press). The Brazilian government is currently friendlier to the movement, and the state ensures a minimum quality of life in the Landless Workers’ settlements by providing free construction materials for building houses and watering constructions, school infrastructure, waste collection, etc.

When one visits a Landless Workers’ settlement, one finds plenty of evidence of its history: in interior decoration, printed on T-shirts, represented by photos of massacres, written poems, or in the Landless Workers’ music. The song presented above is such an example (it was sung during the annual meeting of the Landless Children of Espírito Santo at the regional federal university by the same children who ate cacao fruit with me). The Movement considers the arts to be mystical elements that bring together its members, are constitutive of the Pedagogia do Movimento Sem Terra, and make up part of the Landless Workers’ and their children’s identity (Caldart, 2002).

In this context, a special pedagogics empowers the so-called “Landless Children” (Sem Terrinha, which literally means “landless small ones”) to participate in agricultural production, learning about fruit as well as about the history of colonialism and the Landless Workers’ fights by means of songs, photos, narrations, and theatrical plays—inside and outside the school. The children even organize their own “núcleos de base” in order to participate in the social struggles for a broader agrarian and economic reform in solidarity with the Brazilian children who still do not have access to proper food.

I have explored the specifics of this pedagogics elsewhere (Foerste and Kontopodis, 2012, 2012b) and will not go into details here: a summary would be that Landless Children in this context are first and foremost seen as historical beings who may suffer from social injustice but who can also participate in fighting for a better future in terms of access to certain natural or material goods as well as in terms of dignity and recognition for all (cf. Freire, 1986, 1993). In this sense they are citizens, but not of a state that takes care of their health or of their well-being, as is the case in Germany. The Landless Children are citizens of a state fighting against its own colonial history, a state that could in the future hopefully carry out an agrarian reform.

6. Outlook: from biopedagogies to ecopedagogies?

The few examples presented above are brief and illustrative. I did not aim to account for all possible ways in which children may eat and grow up— not even in the particular settings in question. The list of examples could be endless, and so could be the debates, differences, and heterogeneity concerning “obesity prevention” and “healthy” or “natural” related practices, something I have closely explored elsewhere (Kontopodis, 2012a, 2013a). My focus here is quite different:

Even when taking just the brief, above-sketched examples into consideration, the following similarities among quite diverse fields manifest themselves: what happens outside of the investigated context is in all cases regarded as “not beneficial” or “risks” for the children in question: the industrialized food market offers “unhealthy” temptations for children in Berlin, while urban life can lead to “negative” and “unnatural” experiences; even worse, profit-oriented agribusiness threatens the access to basic nutrition for the rural Brazilian population. In response to these threats, certain measures are undertaken so that children can grow up “well.” “Well” refers primarily to the children’s physical condition: eating fruit and vegetables during a Halloween party in Germany, eating fresh berries in an allotment garden in Berlin, and eating acerola or...
chestsnuts in the settlements of Landless Workers in Brazil is first and foremost “beneficial” for the children’s physical condition. However, in all cases the mood, emotions, and/or mental development of the children (my own generic terms) are taken into consideration. This is why fruit is cut into funny shapes in the preschool; allotment gardens offer space for experiential learning; and, last but not least, the participation in landless agroecology entails learning about history and social justice in Espírito Santo, Brazil. In this sense, physical development and mental/emotional development are simultaneously at stake. The following question poses itself at this point: is this intermingling enough for labeling all such strategies “biopedagogies,” as most approaches referred to in the introduction claim (cf. Wright, 2008)? What are the fine differences between the various practices of eating fruit and vegetables?

In the introductory example (obesity prevention in the preschool), knowledge about the child body has stemmed from biomedicine, while the knowledge about the mental/emotional processes of child development can be traced back to developmental and educational psychology. As already explained in the introduction, this combination of different pieces of knowledge and the resulting institutionalized practices are what most scholars would commonly call “biopedagogy.”

In the next example, from the Berlin allotment garden, knowledge about the child body has stemmed from ecology as well as from holistic pedagogical philosophical scholarship. In this context, the growing child is seen as an intrinsic part of a broader environment (and vice versa: the broader environment is essential for the mental/emotional processes of child development). This ecological and pedagogical—philosophical thinking takes an even more radical form when referring to landless childhood in Espírito Santo, Brazil: colonial history is opposed to “Mother Earth” and the “fruits of the rebellion” are given to the Landless Children not only as food for the body, but also as food for thought (and future political action).

Normative understandings of what “good” or “natural” childhood is, as well as what development is, are as important in these later examples as they are in the introductory preschool scene; the underlying idea in all investigated contexts has been that children should grow as bodies and as persons (in the broadest sense these words may have). This happens only in specifically created biopedagogical spaces that protect children from the outside, and offset the negative effects urban life or colonial history may have. Interestingly enough, in all cases (even if only indirectly, or as a response to grass-roots initiatives and public debates) the state ensures in the end this “protected” status of children in terms of infrastructure, legal regulations, material conditions, etc.

This “protected” status of children, which is quite passive for the children in question, entails the idea of these children “becoming active” in the future in all investigated contexts, albeit in quite different ways:

(a) In the first context, children are expected—if all goes well—to actively maintain a “healthy nutrition” after they get used to eating fruit and vegetables at school;

(b) In the second context, children are expected—if all goes well—to actively maintain their relationship to “nature” as urban residents after growing up with garden experiences;

(c) In the third context, landless children are expected—if all goes well—to actively contribute to the further development of agroecology as well as to the struggles for social justice and agrarian reform in Brazil.

“Being protected” and later on “becoming active” implies that after some time, the whole population of grown-up children will be regulated by itself, without any further (bio)pedagogical intervention necessary. Yet, while children in the first context are envisaged as “self-disciplined” and therefore “healthy” adults-to-be, in the second and even more in the third example, they are envisaged as citizens who will actively engage in ecological and social-justice initiatives and movements (which may entail resistance or opposition to state policies, and not much “discipline” in the sense of Foucault).

The grass-roots examples therefore involve a reversed biopedagogy: bodily issues are considered important when referring to children and they intermingle with pedagogical practices, but all this aims at children embodying certain values about nature and society which exceed biomedical (and individualized) notions of health and prevention. Furthermore, the children in these two settings grow with a potential to resist not only sweet and “unhealthy” temptations, but if needed, the industry, the state, and/or the market economy.

Especially in the Brazilian context, children are not just seen as a “population” in the epidemiological or statistical sense of the word; they are regarded as a “collective” in the sense of critical pedagogy (cf. Freire, 1986, 1993). Given the emphasis that the Berlin allotment garden initiatives and the Landless Movement have placed on ecology (rather than on individualized biomedicine), one could even talk about grass-roots ecopedagogies, which are quite different from the top-down biopedagogies that most studies have explored so far—as reviewed in the introduction to this article. Ecopedagogies exceed biomedical (and individualized) notions of health and prevention and gain even more significance when thinking about contemporary climate change and human futures (Lee, 2013).

These two terms, ecopedagogies and biopedagogies, when used in opposition to each other, reveal the differences between distinct pedagogical modes. At the same time, one should not disregard that there are significant differences between the various state-run health-related programs, just as there are significant differences between ecological movements and initiatives. In that sense, both ecopedagogies and biopedagogies are heterogeneous as such. This becomes quite clear, for example, when comparing allotment gardening in Germany with landless agroecology in post-colonial Brazil.

Macro-analyses of biopower and biopedagogies can therefore be enriched and strengthened through closely exploring and contrasting concrete micro-contexts, as I have done above. Scholarship from neighboring fields such as the anthropology of childhood, food anthropology, and ethnopharmacology (cf. Counihan, 1999; Etkin, 1988; Montgomery, 2008) could inspire sociology of childhood in this regard; but also the other way round: anthropological studies of children, bodies, and foods in their various micro-contexts can benefit significantly from mapping and comprehending the broader links between pedagogical, biomedical, and ecological knowledge underlying ordinary contemporary practices, such as eating fruit and vegetables.

Acknowledgments

This paper would have never been written without the guidance and support of A. Mol. I am deeply thankful to her as well as to S. Beck, J. Niewöhner, C. Heinze, N. Lee, A. M’charek and D. Behague, for their comments and feedback. The German Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF 01GW55051-054) as well as the European Research Council (ERC AdG09 Nr. 249397) financed the two research projects, to which this paper refers. For my research stay at the Federal University of Espirito Santo and my access to the Brazilian countryside I would like to thank E. Foerste and G. M. Schütz-Foerste. A special thanks is also due to the anonymous teachers,
parents, Landless Workers and young children who participated in my research.

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