

# Editorial

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## Approaching and understanding

In tune with two important events on the international stage such as the designation of 1985 as the International Year of Youth and the approval in 1990 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child – both with the support of the United Nations Assembly – a sense of urgency to consider children and youths analytically as subjects of legal rights began to gain force in the field of social science. The global discussion in the sphere of “formal” politics on the rights of the youngest formed part of the debates in the academic world about the historical invisibility of collectives such as children, women, youths, indigenous people and black people. Thus, in studies on subordination and gender, childhood and youth took their place as social and cultural notions that had to be understood in specific contexts, questioning fixed views based mostly on biological parameters. This led to research work in different disciplines such as sociology, history, and anthropology, discussed them and pointed out the importance of thinking about these issues in a situated manner, observing their practices and representations, their family and social spaces, as well as their subjection and resistance to institutions and laws constituted around them.

In this context, the growth – and later consolidation – of studies on childhood and youth modeled in some actors a political posture towards the state of affairs in increasingly unequal societies where children and youths were most affected by it. Social realities objected not only the ways they were conceived in politics, where institutions, norms and specific actions were designed, but also put into question the academic practice that claimed to produce objective knowledge on these individuals. Theoretical frameworks and approaches of situated realities, or multi-situated ones such as migration, were questioned, and in their stead more flexible ways to conduct research have been constructed in which theoretical positions of authors in our region have been incorporated, as well as methodologies centered on the actors, on an understanding of the production of subjectivities that help to understand that, in some cases, there are concepts that have even been losing their explanatory power. A case in point is the concept of identity, since we are dealing with very changeable subjects that require using notions such as performativeness, which has proven to be more elastic, or radically questioning the concept of generation, since some groups of children and youths escape its meaning, when viewed in a homogeneous way.

Thus, in order to understand the situations children and youths go through, the ways in which they appropriate institutional and social norms, the strategies they develop to subvert

the order preordained for them, and their own ways to comprehend the world, ethnography becomes a possible route for research. Ethnography, conceived as a way to construct knowledge on particular social and cultural realities, bound in time and space, in which subjects – both the subjects whom researchers seeks to understand and the researchers themselves – occupy a central place in the development of research and, as Rockwell points out,

Integrating local knowledge into the construction of the description is a constant feature of the ethnographic process. Interpreting local meanings is not a final moment but a continuous, unavoidable process. Integrating such local knowledge is only possible through a theoretical approach that acknowledges and values it as knowledge in the research process. (Rockwell, 2009: 23).

In particular, the main topic of this issue of *Diálogos sobre educación*, “Ethnography about and with children and youths in educational contexts”, coordinated by Diana Milstein, proposes thinking of subjects as active participants in the research processes; that is, as central collaborators in the task of understanding educational processes, which entail heterogeneous rationales that may escape the ones expected by educational institutions, as well as contain specific local knowledge that arise in educational contexts, and which it is fundamental to explain.

We are deeply thankful to Doctor Milstein for proposing for this issue of *Diálogos sobre educación* to reflect on the possibilities of ethnographic research, placing the subjects at the heart of the research process as a route that may go further in understanding contexts that, given their complexity and emergence, require establishing a dialog with the actors. A discussion is opened then, through the papers presented here, on the hows and the whys, when we seek to understand subjects who are even today denied their capacity as actors of change.

Anayanci Fregoso Centeno