Europa-Universität Flensburg
Institut für Erziehungswissenschaften
Kindheits- und Jugendforschung

Submission: 3rd Annual ChYRP International Conference on Children's Rights – "Centering Children Here and Now"

Proposed Title

Adolescence in Polycrisis: Biographical "Bewährung" between Present Experience and an Uncertain Future

Abstract

Young people growing up in the 2020s encounter societal crises that unsettle established expectations about the future. The COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, and geopolitical conflicts become part of the biographical problems through which adolescents orient themselves and develop viable identities and life designs. This paper asks how adolescents attempt to establish themselves as capable actors under conditions in which both their present circumstances and their anticipated futures are increasingly difficult to secure.

The analysis draws on a qualitative longitudinal study of adolescence in polycrisis, comprising approximately 50 cases and follow-up interviews. The paper presents a reconstructive case study of Benjamin, whose biographical trajectory particularly reveals a pattern also found across the wider corpus. Benjamin was interviewed at three points during his transition from secondary school into higher education. The case is analysed heuristically through the concept of "Bewährung": the ongoing necessity of establishing the viability of one's identity and life practice under conditions that cannot ultimately be secured in advance.

The longitudinal reconstruction reveals a paradoxical and potentially unattainable dynamic of "Bewährung." The disruption of everyday school life during the COVID-19 pandemic initially confronts Benjamin with a loss of established orientations, while his position as student representative simultaneously enables him to assume responsibility and act within the crisis. In subsequent years, his engagement extends toward climate change and international political conflicts. His growing commitment to social and political action, however, does not resolve the problem of agency. Rather, the stronger his aspiration to make a meaningful difference, the more acutely he experiences the limits of what he can actually do. His hope for a better future thus coexists with fear that it may turn out differently, and with a growing sense of pressure and frustration over not doing enough.

The case suggests that adolescent agency in conditions of polycrisis cannot be understood simply as a capacity that is either present or institutionally enabled. It emerges as part of an ongoing biographical process of "Bewährung," in which the attempt to establish oneself as a capable and responsible actor can itself generate new experiences of inadequacy and non-fulfilment. Benjamin thus provides a prototypical case of a broader pattern of adolescent self-positioning: the struggle to construct a viable identity and life design while the conditions for future-oriented action remain fundamentally uncertain.

Keywords

Adolescence · Polycrisis · Biographical "Bewährung" · Societal Uncertainty · Biographical Self-Positioning · Reconstructive Longitudinal Research