

**Children, Young People, and Families
(BMHP5004_LON)**

Assessment Component 2

Written Essay

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Childhood is a familiar concept with us since we have all gone through childhood and every adult was once a child. Notwithstanding this familiarity, defining childhood has not been easier as one would have thought, as the definition of childhood is based on the perspective of what members of a particular society, at a particular place and in a particular time, view it. This gives the basis of the claim that childhood is a social construction (Mcdowall, 2013). James and James (2012), as cited in (Norozi and Moen, 2016), define social construction as "a theoretical perspective that explores how reality is negotiated in everyday life through people's interaction and a set of discourses. Therefore, childhood as a social construction seeks to understand how childhood knowledge is constructed and for what purpose it serves. According to Norozi and Moen (2016), the social construction of childhood serves as an alternative way to find out more about children and childhood.

2.0 DISCUSSIONS

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) legally defines childhood to be the stage of every human being below the age of 18 years unless "under the law applicable to the child, the majority is attained earlier" (<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk>). In the UK, childhood is defined as the stage of any person, regardless of gender, under the age of eighteen (NSPCC, 2015). Given the cultural difference and social circumstances children worldwide face, this universal definition of childhood terms creates a commonality of experience that does not exist since childhood varies across the world (De Figueiredo et al., 2012). Furthermore, when age criterion is used to define childhood, it puts children of the same age together in a group irrespective of their cultural or social dynamics (James and James, 2012).

For that matter, James & James (2017) moved a step further from using age or legal criterion in defining childhood but rather explain childhood to be a phase in the course of all people everywhere and a time marked by swift and joint physiological development. Similarly, Qvortrup (1994), as cited in James & James (2004), recognised childhood as a "universal feature of course of life which all societies deal with through the imposition of structures, rules, and laws of different kinds that separate children from the adult in one way or the other." In reference to the imposition of structures, rules, and laws, research indicates that one of the critical elements to consider here is the family. The family is the imposition of these social structures on the child (De Figueiredo et al., 2012). A family is defined as a primary social group, usually connected by kinship or marriage who aims to provide mutual social-economic security and emotional support for its members (McDowall, 2013).

The family is considered the first environment within which a child interacts. It is usually the unit of protection and cares for the child (Wright, 2015). In Social and educational Policy, children are seen as learners and future citizens of a nation. Providing education and protection then falls on the adult or family (Kehily, 2013). The family does not only provide protection and care, but as part of the imposition of the social structures, the family act as the primary agent of socialization where children begin to acquire attitudes, values, and accepted behavior in the society (Shaffer, 2005). It can therefore be said that in the phase of childhood, it is within the family that the child learns basic rules of socialization like how to interact with others, the child also learns values and duties as well as how to behave in the future, and their family primarily influences this learning and socialization. Therefore, the family is considered the first social group the child has (Kehily, 2013). This affirms the Lev Vygotsky theory that the family is a primary means by which a child acquires behaviour and cognitive processes relevant to their society (Vygotsky 1994). Vygotsky considers children "apprentices who learned from those with greater experiences who understood their need and abilities" (Vygotsky 1994 as cited in William, 2020).

In understanding childhood from a historical perspective, Thomas Hobbes in the 17th century saw children as evil or savage with the assertion that originally all people were born with sin. Here the child requires control and regulation from the family, specifically from the mother. Although Hobbes believed that both men and women are equal, each has different social priorities, and therefore, raising children is in the mothers' domain (Tesar et al., 2016). In contrast, childhood idealistic innocent in the 18th century believed children to have come from God and that is, the figure of the child has a spiritual dimension that places the child close to nature, unblemished and not evil compared to the adult (Kehily, 2013). On the other hand, Locke saw childhood as empty with the assertion that "children functioned as blank slates" that requires the family to supply them with knowledge in order for them to become a productive part of the social structure. Thus, Locke's view of childhood as a dependent since the child has no natural capacities and must therefore be minded and directed by the family.

Although Rousseau believed that the child is dependent and needs protection, as asserted by Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau constructed childhood as a wild state of nature, confirming the idea that children come from God. Furthermore, he posited that in regulating and giving protection to the child, there is danger rooted in the dilemma that the very family who is to regulate and direct the child as one of their key elements may serve primarily to corrupt the child (Tesar et al., 2016). It is further explained that childhoods are constructively naïve, but they ultimately require protection from the very forces that purport to nature and develop them" (Tesar et al., 2016). Therefore, children and family history opens up essential doors to experience for children and adults who deal with children (Stearns, 2016). Furthermore, it provides actionable insight into childhood in

recent times by showing how it has moved from the primitive periods to current patterns and how it has shaped children and families' lives (Stearns, 2016).

In the Medieval ages, children had no status in society. They were only considered as miniature adults (Philippe 1986). Aries Philippe (1986) posited that childhood is a modern phenomenon that has come into being relatively recently. This assertion is also affirmed by Postman (1994). He revealed that at first, not much attention was given to childhood as a society were of the notion that people had always given birth and produce children, not recognising that human reproduction was not the same as the social category of 'childhood' (McDowall 2013). Aries affirmed that in the medieval ages, the concept of childhood did not exist, although parents were producing children. It is further argued that even if children were treated with affection, they mainly saw us, undeveloped adults who needed affection. However, the idea of childhood is not a replica of affection for children (Aries, 1986).

Moreover, it is argued that children's lives have been progressively worse the further back you look into history (De Mause 1994; Oliver & Pitt, 2011). For instance, in Ancient Greek and Roman times, infanticide and abandonment of children were rampant and unwanted children, especially female babies, were exposed to die. There was a high rate of infant mortality, and children below the age of seven stayed at home with their mothers and contributed to household chores, with the females mostly caring for their siblings (Oliver & Pitt, 2011). The girls were made to marry at the age of 15, while the boys were encouraged to work alongside the men and get married somewhere around 30 years (Wright, 2015). There was a wide inequality gap

Then came the medieval ages, where children lived and worked alongside the adults. They wear the same clothes as the adults and work on the same activities adults did (Clarke, 2011). According to Wright (2015), children in the industrial revolution from the middle of the 17th century to the beginning of the 18th century were employed as factories and mills workers since child labour was cheap, and in most cases, children are forced to work for long hours with little pay (Wright 2015). Children who were not treated differently from the adults were not concerned due to their young age (McDowall Clark, 2013). The family saw children as an economic asset.

The first change in the thinking of childhood was the Victorian era, where society became conscious of children and their needs, and there was a deliberate limitation on family size (Banks 1968; Clarke 2011). This led to a decline in the average number of children from between 5 or 6 in the 1870s to below 2 in the 1970s (Clarke 2011). The class system developed at that time saw the upper and middle-class children being more cared for and protected while the lower-class children were made to work in factories and were heavily exploited, and some became recalcitrant (Clarke 2011). This also points to another issue of inequality and vulnerability. The living conditions

in the cities started deteriorating, and health policy and legislation were introduced to improve lives in the city and set limits on age and hours for work. By the end of the Victorian Era, compulsory education had been introduced (Wright 2015). This changed children from being an economic asset to be valued as "part of the family strategy for survival, something into which the parents had to pour resources in the hope of receiving emotional and expressive rewards rather than financial returns" (Clarke 2011).

Today, children have a better chance than they did at any time in History (Global childhood report 2019). In this 21st century, children grow healthy. They are well protected, educated, and have the opportunity to reach their full potentials as they did a generation ago where the infant mortality rate was high, and about 70% of children were involved in child labour, and about 20% were more likely to be murdered (Global childhood report 2019). However, policies and legislation in recent times have played a vital role in the lives of children and their families by ensuring the welfare of children and the healthy lives children are living today.

The changing ideologies and constructions of childhood in modern times have prompted government to formulate policies and provide services that suit today's children. For example, compulsory education, which was started around the 19th century, was followed by educational reform programs to make children in the UK highly skilled (Montgomery et al. 2009), then followed the Child Poverty Target to meet the child's present and future needs and also advocate for children to enjoy the benefit of prosperity (Montgomery et al. 2009).

In 1989 the Child Act came into force, consolidating all laws on children for better protection. "The law now placed new duties on local authorities to provide help to needy children and families in their areas." Its statutory guidance also resulted in increased specialization within public care services" (Child Act 1989). Based on this, today's children are given due regards to their wishes and feelings in providing services that suit them most compared to the past where children were not regarded, and they have to use the same services adults use even though it might not suit them. The Child Act 1986 was further modified in 2004 and places responsibilities on the family and persons providing care to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

The Equality Act of 2010 also has, in a way, eliminates discrimination and provided equal opportunity for all children. Thus, for example, children of today, whether a boy or girl, have equal access to education compared to the past where only male children were educated, and the girls were made to marry at an earlier age, and baby girls being abandoned.

Moreover, the Children and Social work Act 2017 has promoted and safeguarded the lives of children and regulated social workers. For instance, in the UK, social workers staff are given

mandatory induction on child protection and procedures to follow in order to secure child's safety as required by the Children Act 2004 and to work Together to Safeguard Children (2015), especially from sexual abuse and any other form of abuse. For instance, in England and Wales, every council has its own Local Safeguarding Board (LSCB). Moreover, safeguarding children adopt a child-centered approach and is coordinated. That is, it is everyone's responsibility, not the child's immediate family alone.

Moreover, from 2010 to 2015 UK government introduced the following interventions in child health care to bridge the gap in inequality in child health care; one of such interventions was helping families to have the best start in life. That was to make sure that women have a better experience of maternity care to provide quality health care for babies. Maternity was improved by giving expecting mothers personnel midwives, mothers were also giving them opportunities to choose the method of birth they want, and more attention was given to women who have had complications with pregnancies before. These interventions aided in reducing the infant mortality rate (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/>)

Another intervention was helping families to keep their children healthy through the Healthy Child Programs. Protected children from severe diseases through immunisation, identified and assisted vulnerable children who have been neglected by their parents (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/>)

Moreover, the government improved the mental health of children and young people who are vulnerable and marginalized in society by providing access to mental health therapies which many could not have afforded without these interventions (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/>)

2.1 Recommendations

There should be more equitable welfare reforms that protect vulnerable children in society, such as providing better social security support for families caring for children with chronic diseases like autism, mental illness, and disabilities (Wickham et al., 2016). This is important since the support will reduce the financial burden on the family in order for the families not to neglect and abandon these vulnerable children.

Child health professionals should advocate for policy action that supports parent capacity building to have the requisite resources to provide quality health care for the children (Wickham et al., 2016). This is important because when parents can minimize their financial resources, they are in

a better position to afford quality health care, provide food and clothing for their children, and children, on the other hand, will have access to the quality life they deserve.

Local policy actors should continue to shift from downstream behavioral interventions and invest in public health programs focused on early intervention and prevention like affordable housing, bridging income inequality. These interventions should be based within the communities and tailored to vulnerable children and their families (Holding et al., 2021).

3.0 CONCLUSION

To conclude, the impact of social policies and legislation services support childhood, and the policies directed to their families or caregivers also put the families and caregivers on their toes to support and safeguard the child at all costs. This is because the 21st child lives in an uncertain environment with diverse and increasingly complex life in the range of family uncertainty; therefore, the policies and legislation protect the child from the social changes that may arise.

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