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

Assessment Component 2

Individual - Written Essay

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Submission Date: 3-Sept-21

Word count: 2741

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Introduction

There have been several debates, researches, and discussions about the concept of children to find out what the concept means and why children are treated differently from adults. Some studied the history of childhood, others discussed how children are viewed in different societies whereas others discussed factors that influence family life and childhood. Therefore, this essay provides an insight of what childhood is; social construction of childhood, childhood experiences, key elements of family life and childhood; changes seen in lives of children from past to present as well pointing out interventions which support vulnerable children, young people, and families based on the previous studies by other researchers, policy statements and relevant laws. The essay concludes by suggesting recommendations to improve on children experiences.

Discussion

Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 1986 of India gives a legal definition of a child to mean any person who has not yet completed 14 years of age. Legally, this law defines a child and minor differently. For example, as per Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 1986, a minor is any person between the age of 15 years and 18 years while a child is one who has not completed 14 years. United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child defines a child differently as a person below 18 years whereas the US Immigration Law refers to a child as “anyone unmarried who is under the age 21”. In the UK, a person is regarded as a child for support when he/she is under the age of 16 or one under 19 years of age who is in fulltime education. (Children Act, 2004). Biology thinks otherwise and defines a child as simply someone who is “between the development of infancy and puberty. (Wakim and Grewal, 2021). Puberty differs according to sex of the age because averagely it begins at 11 years and 12 years for girls and boys respectively. (Wakim and Grewal, 2021). Therefore, a state of development between infancy and puberty is referred to childhood.

According to Blanchet (1996), childhood is the period in time where a person is physically and emotionally immature which makes him/her needy or vulnerable compared to the adults. In childhood, a person lacks autonomy and ends up socially

dependent to the people in the society. Children are physically immature because they cannot take care of themselves in a proper way as expected. For example, they cannot make proper decisions because of their inability to think and reason out things like the adults do. The children need help with personal care like washing, bathing, cooking, and even playing because they are physically immature. (Woodhead, 2011). Therefore, physical immaturity of children makes socialization lengthy, and the children rely on adults for biological needs and support. (Woodhead, 2011). On the other hand, children are psychologically immature because they are not competent to run their lives, and therefore cannot be held responsible for their actions. (Jung, 2015). Children are generally emotionally depending on adults.

Childhood as a social construct

According to Gittins (1997), the concepts of child and childhood inequalities are constructed socially and historically. This is because children's behaviour and portrayals are determined by what the society perceives of them, and what the adults want them to become. For example, the society expects children to be respectful and kind to the elders. A child who fails to do this is referred to as "bad mannered" in the society. The acts of disciplining children also differ from society to society basing on cultural beliefs. The modern society in European countries does not permit beating of children as a way of disciplining them, while the African traditional society normalized beating as a form of disciplining children. (Runyan et al., 2010).

Society also decides what the children should and not do as they grow up whether social, political and economic. For example, Society does not allow children take part in political decisions like voting for political leaders. (Sharpe, 2015). This cuts across the globe in all countries.

The society perceives childhood as a stage where children are vulnerable in all aspects because they exposed to environmental risks like; crime, kidnap, social isolation, manipulation, drug abuse among others. This is why society requests special treatment of children as way of caring and supporting them differently from adulthood. Children who have adulthood responsibilities like parenthood are considered "young adults" and society regards them as adults even if they are not yet adulthood age. (Biddle, 2012). In the society, children need parental in all things including playing and socializing, the parents decide the kind of people his/her child

should socialize and with who. For example, letting children alone to play alone in the parks can lead to neglect charges. (McCarren, 2015).

Children experiences in India

Sexual abuse

Studies in Indian societies revealed that there are many types of sexual abuse to school going children. For example, many children reported that they were abused with bad remarks because of their faces, body and some of their body parts. Other students said that they forcefully forced into sex, exposure to dirty pictures, and forcefully touching their privates. (Jumper 1995). Some children have also been victims of rape where adults forcefully put their private in their mouths, vagina and anus. (Kumar et al., 2012). All these acts of sexual abuse impair children's physical health, and has contributed to teenage pregnancies and diseases. (Cashmore & Shackel, 2013).

Physical abuse of children at home and school

According to Campbell and Lewandowski (1997), physical beating like beating of children is an acceptable norm in Traditional Indian Family. In fact, people in India have normalized violence on children. (Philips, 2003). Physical abuse in Indian is used in form of heavy punishment associated with instilling good behaviour, need for good grades at school, and to ensure the children are disciplined and compliant to parents guidelines. (Runyan et al., 2010).

Emotional abuse

Children in Indian have reportedly been emotionally abused by parents, colleagues, and teachers through insults, intimidation, and threats. Some children also have been subjected to bullying which has made them lose their self confidence and self-esteem in the society. (Ramya and Kulkarni, 2011). Reports by WHO (1999) also revealed many cases of child neglect and dangerous punishments like withholding food and other basic needs. This has impacted negatively on the behaviour of children as they grow up and in adulthood.

Factors influencing family life and childhood.

The increased number of women getting into employment has greatly affected

family life because the families have now become smaller since the working mothers have limited time for looking after children. (Kumar, 2019). Higher education levels among the modern parents has changed how children are perceived today. For example, many educated parents give away their children for adoption due to their responsibilities achieved through education, and unwillingness to stay with children. (Coleman and Garratt, 2016). Children who are victims of such circumstances grow up with lack of parental care, low confidence and low self-esteem which later affects their ability to be good parents in future.

In the previous years, several researchers revealed high rates of fertility and averagely large family sizes. (Nuttall et al., 2000). This is because families where extended and societies found joy in having many children since they used them as “economic assets” which led to large families. (Carsaro, 2011). As time went by, the society greatly influenced the size of the families by coming up with many beliefs. For example, the society started appreciating the role of education which reduced on teenage marriages especially in less developed countries (Field and Ambrus, 2008). Education helped to reduce on the number of people getting married since a lot of time is taken in school hence lower family sizes compared to previous years. (UNICEF, 2009).

In European countries like the UK and the USA, there is a rise in same sex couples which greatly impacts on the family life in these countries. According to American Psychological Association (APA) (2004), there is nothing wrong with being gay or lesbian because it is one’s right. Their research revealed that same sex couples are on a rise in Europe because they have an option of adopting children and live happily like other families whose parents are not gay. The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy also found that children from gay families were found to be more resilient and tolerant at school and they grow up very well like other children in all aspects like; physical and emotional functioning, sexual orientation, stigmatization, and gender roles. The society in European countries has generally accepted the existence of same sex couples, and has established gay rights to protect these couples.

However, some countries especially Africa and Asian counties have not yet socially and culturally accepted same sex couples and therefore children who believe in

being gay and lesbian will have trouble living in these countries because it is not morally accepted, and religion does not permit it. (Boesak, 2011).

Some cultures do not give freedom to do whatever they want. For example, some parents dictate how children should dress up, how should act, how to spend their leisure times which affects their lives. This affects family life because children will always feel intimidated since they are deprived of their rights of expression. Children from these families will feel left out as they compare their lives with children from other families. (Sarwar, 2016).

Lives of children from Historical times to Present

Rousseau's ideas 1762

Rousseau's views on child development rejected the previous views that children were regarded as "original sin" but he instead believed that children are gifts from God. Rousseau believed that children are born innocent but they are later corrupted by the experiences and the environmental factors which is similar to Locke's views. (Kassen, 1978). Unlike the Puritans, Rousseau thinks that children do not have restrictions but should instead be given duly support to grow up well, and allowed to develop naturally without societal constraints. He assumed that children are born with natural instincts to tell whether something is good or bad. He believed that children are born with special talents and potential which later unfolds as they interact with the environment. (Kassen, 1978). Parents and other people in the society should help the children to exploit their special talents and potential.

In the early years, the concept of childhood was not yet known until it was invented in the 18th Century Enlightenment by French historian Philippe Aries in his influential books, and the periods that followed it. Historically, child labor was normal in the 19th century where children were working in the industries and farms to earn their own living. (Aries, 1962).

In the 1800s and Early 1900s, children were regarded as small versions of adults who were required to earn their own money for food, education among others until many organizations came up to fight for their rights like; United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child (UNCRC), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Plan International, Children International, Save the Child, and World Vision International

among others.

On the other hand, childhood in the modern context can be defined as a period of minority which lasts from the date of birth to adulthood. Adulthood varies according to place and purpose. For example, in the US and the UK, persons who are aged 18 years or 16 are considered mature enough for the military service but considered immature for buying and consuming alcohol. (Children Act, 2004).

Before the 19th century, children were subjected to child labor because they were “economic assets”, and expected to work for their living. However, the 19th Century Factories Act restricted child labor. This helped in protecting children from child labor. In England, the law permits only those children who are above 16 years to work fulltime. (Children Act, 1989). Children are no longer expected to work for their own living but instead entitled to basic needs and other needs from their parents, relatives and foster parents.

Interventions

Parenting programmes

Like mention before, children’s health and wellbeing depends entirely on the families where they belong. Parenting programmes have been established to protect children through parental support. These programmes are established to teach and encourage parents to develop a greater understanding of child development by helping parents to deal with their issues like; mental health illness, disabilities, unemployment and poverty. Through these parenting programs, home visits have been made to help parents solves their parental problems thereby reducing on the risks of vulnerability of the children. This has been by interventions of Troubled Families Programme (2015-2020) in different societies of England.

Support for teenage parents

According to UNICEF (2009), there is a rise of teenage parenting in some countries like Ethiopia and India which has led to many social inequalities affecting children as a result of teenage parents. Teenage parenthood does not exclude the victims from the definition of children and therefore they needed to be treated as children even if they are parents. (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child, 2010). In Great Britain, several programs have been established to support these teenage

parents because they need maternal assistance, child care, emotion support, housing and food. Programs like; Children's Health Insurance Programs, Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, housing benefits for teenage Parents, and Teen Moms Youth Development clubs aimed at reducing children's risks of vulnerability, and enhancing teenage parents with relevant parental skills which in turn helps children. (UNICEF, 2009). These programs are implemented by the government and several agencies like Local Authorities, Police, Non-Government Organizations and Charities.

Services for children Disabilities

According to Article 23 of Children Act (1989, 2004), children with disabilities have a right to special care and support to enable them access equal opportunities in the society. Government through Departments of Health and Education has implemented several programs to help disabled children achieve health care, social care and education. These have been achieved through formation of teams like; Disabled Children Social Team, Disabled Children's Family support & Reviewing Team, Disabled Children's Family Outreach Team among others, all overseen by Disabled Children Service. These teams have helped to tackle social inequalities because disabled children have been able to receive special education support for the deaf and blind, disabled special events, activities and social groups, housing benefits in addition to grants for parents with disabled children to help them get equal opportunities in the community. (UNICEF, 2013).

Conclusion

To a larger extent, the concept of childhood is generally accepted as important because children are being looked at as people who are needy and vulnerable across the Globe. This is why every country has laws and guidelines purposely to protect children, and promote child health care by establishing and implementing health and school programs through which offer children an opportunity for quality health and education respectively. It is an achievement that society has shifted from using children as "economic assets" to spending on children as away preparing them for adulthood. Society views children as future generation and this is why they shape children's, and instill good behavior that is generally accepted in the society as well as treating children more fairly compared to the adults. However, some countries

like India are still behind as far as children protection and welfare is concerned due to the rising cases of abuse on children which gives negatively affects children cognitive development.

In conclusion therefore, the following are the recommendations;

Governments of various countries should double their efforts in empowering the children with better education, skills, and more informed choice to enable them attain the right education and have a clear career path. For this to be successful, government should partner with both parents and teachers to ensure children are well guided and supported.

There are still cases of child abuse in many countries, and therefore the government should put more emphasis on policies that are meant to safe guard and protect children from any kid of harm and unfairness. Strict laws should be put in place to protect children from physical, sexual and emotional abuse especially in countries where abuse has been normalized like India.

Through the local authorities, program should be established to provide counselling services and parental support to families facing relationship problems and other parental issues to ensure both parents are living in harmony for the sake of the children. This will help to reduce on divorce cases, single parenting, and will eventually reduce on the number of children adopted.

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