



Assessment Component 2
Written Essay

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INTRODUCTION

This essay explores the concept of childhood as a social construct. The main objective of this work is to analyse childhood from a historical point of view, thus promoting an understanding of the paradigm shift regarding the concept of childhood throughout history. Based on reflections on the different conceptions of childhood, this essay aims to show through history how this conception was constituted over time. The discussions presented were carried out from a systematic bibliographic review based on specialised literature, where it can be observed that the concepts we have about childhood in contemporaneity are vital pieces to understand the historical process by which it was constituted, taking into account the context in which they were produced. A brief historical review will be made about the conception of childhood in different historical periods, exploring the different paradigms around the subject. It also incorporates the evolution of the concept's meaning to present times and a discussion about the current service provision of promoting the safeguarding of children in the UK.

According to The United Convention Of The Rights Of The Child (UNCRC), a child is everyone under 18, unless the age majority is attained earlier. In England, a child is defined as anyone under the age of 18, including emancipated minors. According to the law, these are still children and have the same right to protection and entitlements as any other child (Department for Education, 2015).

Biologically speaking, childhood is the period between birth and the onset of puberty (Marks, 2021).

The conception of childhood that we have today was an invention of modernity, historically constituted by determined sociocultural conditions. "Childhood would be a concept, a representation, an ideal type to characterise elements common to different children" (Fernandes; Kuhlmann Júnior, 2004, p. 28). Based on this principle, we can consider that childhood changes over time and with different social, economic, geographic contexts, and even with individual peculiarities. Therefore, today's children are not the same as those of years past, nor will they be the same ones in years to come. Studies have shown that childhood should be understood as a particular way of thinking about the child and not a universal state experienced by everyone in the same way (Iglesias, 2007).

According to Ridge (2012), social policies play a vital role in children's and families lives. Their present and future well-being depend on welfare services that cover their needs through education, health, and social welfare policies.

Childhood is not experienced in the same way by children around the world. Children are subjected to a greater risk of poor outcomes associated with inequality than the general population. The gap between the richest and the poorest is twice as high compared to adults. The effects of inequality are also more damaging because of the vulnerability of this life stage.

The lack of adequate nutrition, education, access to healthcare and protection from abuse and exploitation hinders the children's chances of leading a fulfilling life safe from harm (Espey et al., 2012).

To illustrate the impact inequality has on children in the developing world, in Yemen, data from the United Nations and the Yemeni government show that 14% of Yemeni girls are forced to marry before turning 15, and 52% do so before the age of 18. The widespread practice of child brides as young as eight that are married off to much older men compromises not only their health and well-being, but also their fundamental human rights (Human Rights Watch, 2011). It is a situation of stark contrast to that of the UK, where child marriage is prohibited and illegal to coerce anyone into marriage. Moreover, access to education and healthcare is free and compulsory for every child in England.

The definition of a child stated in Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Department for Education, 2010) does not apply except if the national law recognises the earlier age of majority. There are countries in which the age of majority can only be obtained via marriage, leaving child brides unprotected until turning eighteen. Ensuring protection until the age of 18 would decrease the risk of children being sexually exploited (Espey et al., 2012). The age of sexual consent is the age a person must be to be considered legally capable of consenting to a sexual relationship. The legal age varies from country to country, for example:

In Spain, the Penal Code establishes the age of consent at 13 years, while In UK is 16 years (NSPCC, 2020). In the Maldives, legislation is absent on the age of sexual consent, leaving children vulnerable to exploitation.

The lack of legislation and protection of minors in these countries translates into an extreme risk of children from poor households being sexually exploited. In India alone, between 270,000 and 400,000 minors are currently being prostituted, and every year 3,000 Indian girls are forced into prostitution. In Thailand, the situation affects 80,000 minors, of which 60,000 are under 13 years of age. In Indonesia, 20% of sexually exploited women are minors (Valdés and Jiménez, 2008).

When discussing childhood and what concerns the child, their environment, ties, and relationships must be included. The family has changed over time, giving rise to new family

models. These new family conformations in all their variations, single fathers and mothers, assembled households, households in which both parents have the same gender, etc.; They are realities that prompt us to reflect and analyse in the future the possible repercussions that it will have on the psychic structures of the child, taking into account that these configurations were not on the rise at the time that psychoanalytic theories were created (Bernard. 2002).

Aries (2006) states that the concept of childhood developed parallel to the concept of family, manifesting itself through intimacy and family dialogue to turn to the child. In this context, the child appears to be loved and educated, and these duties constituted the base family of society.

Taking into account the new definitions and conceptions given with the approval of equal marriage and adoption in this new family system, it has been demonstrated that the formation of an LGBTQ family does not affect the development of a child, as it would occur in a traditional marriage, this according to research carried out by Berástegui et al. (2006) and Rosser et al. (2010).

The family is the first and closest support network for people; for this reason, it is important to promote a healthy family environment where the necessary resources are provided for the individuals' good personal and social development (Cardona et al., 2015).

These authors defend that the family is a creation of culture, biological and cultural aspects that are not mutually exclusive but complementary and mutually conditioning. Biology and culture find their point of union in the socialisation process of the person, especially in the early ages in which the biological being must acquire its condition of being social within a specific human group (López, 2015).

When resuming the "various" concepts of childhood, it is clear that this conception was historically constructed, passing through the miniature adult in the Middle Ages and reaching the citizen child in contemporary times (Fernandes and Kuhlmann Júnior, 2004, p. 29).

When studying the theme of Childhood in Ancient Rome, it is observed that the birth of a child "was not just a biological fact" but also a fact of paternal acceptance. When the father lifted the child off the ground, he agreed to raise him, in an act of adoption. According to Veyne (1989), contraception, abortion, abandonment, and death of children during this period were common and considered legitimate attitudes, and the abandoned ones rarely survived.

The child that the father did not accept was displayed in front of the house or a public dump; for whoever wanted to pick it up. However, the abandonment of legitimate children had as its

primary cause the misery of some and the patrimonial policy of others. They rejected or drowned malformed children (in that there was no anger, but reason, says Seneca: It is necessary to separate what is good from what is useless). However, even the richest could reject an unwanted child whose birth could disturb established testamentary dispositions (Veyne, 1989, pp. 24). In Ancient Greece and Rome, the state was the institution in charge of education until the middle ages, when the arrival of Christianity shifted the notion of both secular and religious education.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the idea of liberal education disappeared completely. The goal of education was not to train free thinkers, but to prepare the child to serve God and the Church with total submission (Aries, 2006).

In the Middle Ages, and for much longer in the popular classes, children lived mixed with adults, approximately from the age of seven years. From that moment on, boys suddenly entered the great community of men and shared their daily jobs and games with their friends, young or old (Iglesias, 2007).

Until the twelfth century, there was no conception of childhood. Aries (2006) emphasises that "in medieval society the child, from the moment he started to act without his mother's solicitude, entered the society of adults and was no longer distinguished from them" (Aries, 2006).

Aries (2006) made the startling claim that medieval civilisation did not perceive a transitional period between childhood and adulthood. Then, its starting point was a society that perceived younger people as adults on a smaller scale (Aries, 1981, Heywood, 2004, pp. 23).

Aries (2006) points out that the child/infancy relationship was changing with the spread of new thoughts and behaviours in the Catholic Church. These new behaviours gave rise to new family models that highlighted the importance of the blood tie. In the eighteenth century, the Catholic Church began to accuse those who killed children of practising witchcraft. Thus, in the tenth and eleventh centuries, marriage and the act of procreating became sacred.

Childhood starts to be recognised, according to Heywood and Costa (2004), based on the Christian discourse of the "cult of the baby Jesus" and the "massacre of the innocents" practised by Herod. According to the author, the idea that the child is a mediator of heaven and earth begins to spread, and, in this scenario, the concept of childhood began to emerge.

According to Aries (2006), children have been considered small adults since "age only gives greater physical size and provides experience." That is why children in the sixteenth century, according to Gélis (1997, pp. 83–100), children blended into society, participating in the same tasks and customs. This lack of differentiation between children and adults meant children

were often in environments not intended or appropriate for them. According to this conception, the child is in the process of reaching maturity, a maturity that is only achieved in adulthood.

During this period, the individualisation of the child emerges, as the author Gélis (1997, pp.83–100) discusses. This individualisation of being a child refers, in this historical moment, to the perception of the child as an individual.

In this circumstance, parents began to worry about educating their children and providing them with their world. Aries (2006) says that the child started to be the centre of the family in this period due to its connection with the figure of angels who are considered pure and divine beings. This concept of individual made the child become a target of family control and the environment in which he was inserted. This fact favoured the emergence of the school institution. The child began to be recognised as a social individual, inserted within the community, where the family showed concern and interest in their health and education.

According to Susana Iglesias (2007), in the Modern Age, a paradigm shift happened in the concept of childhood. Childhood was "discovered in the sense of manifesting what was hidden". This period is characterised by the Industrial Revolution, a stage in which children, together with their mother and father, emigrate from rural to urban areas intending to work in factories, a circumstance that increased their value as they became an object of exchange. Thus, parents rented their children to factory owners.

The exploitation of children was key to Britain's economic growth in the nineteenth century. Although a law was passed in 1788 against child labour, children continued to be used for labour, such as chimney sweeping, due to their size. Moreover, the factory law made employing children younger than nine illegal (The National Archives, 2019).

Attitudes shifted at the end of the nineteenth century when the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) was founded in 1889. The Education Act of 1900 also brought forth changes; it made education available and compulsory to children in Britain regardless of their class and background (NSPCC, 2020).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) elevates children to the category of subjects of rights, establishing a series of universal rights specific to children. In this way, the concept of "minor" is replaced by "child". Thus, it led to the creation of institutions that watch over the rights of girls, boys and adolescents. The legal discourse then addresses the protection of rights, supported by the principle of the best interests of the child established in Law 26061 (Department for Education, 2015).

John Locke (1632-1704), one of the most influential modern political philosophers, claimed that every human being is free by nature and has a right to liberty, life, and property. In

opposition to the absolutism of the time, Locke affirms that national sovereignty resides in the people from whom the power of the state emanates freely and reciprocally. For its part, the state was obliged to safeguard the rights of the people, the most important being the right to personal liberty or private property (Tuckness, 2005). Locke argued that children are not born good or bad, but experience and habits shape the individual. Likewise, these ideas highlight Rousseau's opinions on this subject; he considers that all individuals are born free and equal. He affirmed that people are good by nature but that society corrupts them. He revolutionised pedagogy by defending that education should be based on the natural education of girls and boys and considered that a child is born free of any vice, as the first notion of our human nature; however, as he grows and is "educated", he is transferred the same vices and errors of the adult. (Ayala, 2020).

Bronfenbrenner (1976) agrees and claimed that societal and environmental factors that include cultural and economic conditions influence the developmental outcomes of the individual. His biological theory emphasises that direct and indirect environments shape children's outcomes; in other words, children are a product of their environment (Ashiabi and O'Neal, 2015).

Maslow (1943) argued that human beings pursue goals as long as the environment is optimal. Therefore, our goals vary depending on our situation. To aspire to self-realisation, located at the highest level of the pyramid, we must have covered the previous needs such as security or physiological. Maslow's pyramid depicts the hierarchy of our needs, ordered and based on our well-being. Maslow explained that as we satisfy the most basic needs, we aspire to more complex ones (McLeod, 2020).

Lowe et al. (2015) report that children neurological development claims have become central to creating welfare policies in England. Research focuses on early years' neural vulnerability, and the disruption environmental influences cause on the child. However, the subject is too complex to be accurately used to explain humanity in a broader context.

Child cruelty has been prosecuted in England since 1880. Subsequent inquiries and policy reviews to child protection services continue to develop today, seemingly propelled by tragic high profile child abuse cases that show that the system still fails to protect all children from harm. In 1990 the UK signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) that enforces international children's rights to live to their full potential (NSPCC, 2020).

In their research, Walker and Donaldson (2010) argue that there are still grave concerns about early prevention and intervention in the provision of multi-agency support in the UK. These underpin the commitment to end child poverty in the UK. Although policies and services are statutory, and there is a range of services such as child benefits, school meals, Universal Credit, housing benefit and free healthcare provided by the NHS that are available to every

child in the UK, poverty and social inequalities continue to be prevalent in current times. Referrals for interventions rely heavily on teachers and the local community to detect the onset of risky outcomes. However, evidence shows that a culture shift is needed for professionals to be more attuned to the early warning signs and be willing to advocate for the young people they encounter.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, even though children welfare continues to develop and has dramatically improved in modern times, poverty is still rife in the most disadvantaged areas of the UK. According to The Child Poverty Action Group (2021), 4.3 million children lived in poverty in the UK between 2019 and 2020. Scraping the two-child limit and the benefit cap would lift 100.000 children out of poverty. The four-year-long freeze on benefits should be restored and kept in line to match inflation. Moreover, the service provision and the benefits administration should be swifter and focus on early action in response to early warning signs to reduce childhood poverty and inequality in the future.

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