

Culture, Identity & Education

Concepts of childhood

The Concept of Childhood

- *'What is a child, or to be a child?'* Francis Bacon (1550)
- What is childhood?
- *'I ain't a child...I'm past eight, I am.'* Girl selling watercress in mid 19th century London
- When does it begin? At conception? At birth? At some point beyond babyhood?
- When does it end? At puberty? When we leave school? When we stop being financially dependent on our families? When we can serve in the Armed Forces? Buy alcohol? Drive a car?
- No ceremony or ritual or marker in UK but in other countries.

What is a child?

- A young human being
- A child is in the stage of life know as childhood
- A child is *not* an adult Cregan & Cuthbert (2014)

Some general thoughts

- Ideas about childhood changed greatly, e.g. when can a person be said to be held criminally responsible?
- Set at 12 in Middle Ages (possibly half of all children born would not reach the age of 10).
- However, 7-year-old girl hanged in Norwich in 18th century for stealing a petticoat.
- Improvements in standard of living have lowered rates of puberty by about 3 years over a century.
- Puberty in nearly all societies is one of the markers of the end of childhood. Is it in the UK?

Childhood in the UK

- Factors such as gender and social class have shaped the lives of children through the ages.
- Also, major historical events, e.g. military conflicts, the Reformation, the rise of the British Empire and the Industrial Revolution.
- Ideas about when childhood starts and ends and how it differs from adulthood, have changed over the centuries.
- 'Inventions' and 're-inventions' of childhood have affected children very much.

Example: Account of Joseph Hebergam, 17 years old in 1831-2

- Started work at 7 years in mill from 5am to 8pm with 30 min break at noon.
- One man's sole job was to beat the children if they slacked. Carried a strap.
- 10 years, move to woollen factory.
- Longer hours of work; not strap now but fist and foot.
- He wished he had been a West Indian slave as he thought they were treated better.

Victorian Era: exploitation of children at work

- Much abuse of poor children in the workhouses.
- Poor children worked in cotton factories or coalmines, fewer up chimneys.
- Lots sent from the workhouses to north of England and Midlands to work machines for nothing.
- Had to work 14 hour days despite injuries to limbs.
- Very high mortality rates

Legislation

- 1802, 1819, 1825 and 1829 - to limit child exploitation but lack of enforcement procedures, so little change.
- 1832 - campaigners: action for **Ten Hours Act**.
- 1833 Factory Act but 10 hour day and 4 inspectors (for whole of UK).
- However, no child under 9 in factory;

- 1840s: children in mines.
- Example: Sarah Gooder aged 8, a trapper:
'It does not tire me but I have to trap without a light and I'm scared. I go at 4 and sometimes half past 3 in the morning an come out at 5 and half past. I never go to sleep. Sometimes I sing when I've light, but not in the dark...I don't like being in the pit. I am very sleepy when I go sometimes in the morning... I would like to be at school far better.'
- Both her sisters, 17 and 12, also worked in pit.
- 1870s worst horrors over

However...

- In early 20th century most young people in the UK over the age of 14 were expected to be in full time work whether paid or in the home. Unless they were part of the 'upper classes'.
 - Exploitative and unjust?
- There were:
- Employment restrictions
 - Compulsory schooling
 - frameworks in place in line with UNCRC that assumed not yet fully developed responsibility for under 18's
 - Did such children as in our example think things were unjust and the treatment unusual?

NOW: Dark passage persists

- Eventually, began to imagine a world where children didn't work at all.
 - However, this dark passage in the history of childhood in Britain now repeated throughout the world in different countries.
- Millions of children in developing countries today like those in Victorian Britain.
- Long hours, bad conditions and cruel discipline continue today.
 - **They also are children without a childhood.**

The Value of Children

- Why do adults have children?
- Can you think of some reasons?

Study of population and fertility Hoffman & Hoffman (1973 cited in Cregan & Cuthbert 2014)

Particularly in global North:

1. Adult status and social identity – full transition to parenthood.
2. Expansion of the self, tie to a larger entity, 'immortality'.
3. Primary group ties, affection
4. Stimulation, novelty, fun
5. Achievement, competence, creativity
6. Power, influence, ability have an impact on things
7. Social comparison, competition
8. Economic utility

Global South:

As above, probably but also:

Labour and utility of children – capacity to contribute to family economy in childhood and support aged parents in adulthood – still an important consideration.

Glimpse at African childhoods

- 'My child is my crown'. Yoruba saying
- Children intrinsic to being alive.
- If you are alive, you want to create more life.
- Unthinkable not to want children or welcome their presence.
- They link past and present and ensure lineage.

Sense of community different

- Part of a web of mutuality.
- Insurance against old age.
- Share in labourious household tasks with no mod cons.
- No special toys or equipment for play.
- Trained to take responsibility at early age.
- No child sleeps alone.
- No-one is ever alone.

Economic value of children in Nepal and Indonesia

Jobs include:

- Child care;
- Household food preparation;
- Firewood collection;
- Other household maintenance work;
- Animal care;
- Wage labour (agricultural);
- Handicrafts;
- Reciprocal labour exchange, community labour;
- Agricultural work (own land);
- Production of articles for sale.

Nag et al, (1978 cited in Cregan & Cuthbert 2014)

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Childhood

- Childhood as a social and historical artefact (only around 150 years old)
- The format of the phase known as childhood has been produced by social, cultural, political and economic forces operating upon it
- Biological assumptions of classical childhood
- Changing concepts of childhood – the modern perspective

Task

- We are familiar with the work of Piaget amongst other theorists who have outlined categories of child development and stages etc but are they helpful today?
- In groups think about the social, cultural, political and economic factors affecting how we might understand and analyse modern childhood within the UK.

The postmodern family

- In the 1950's 80% of children were raised in 'traditional' family settings.
- There has not been as strong a recognition in recent years of the needs of non-traditional family configurations and the support that they might require
- The feminization of poverty? (Polakow 1992)

Positivism and childhood

- Positivism is the position that maintains that all knowledge of worth is produced via the scientific method
- However, positivism can overlook some key issues that we need to consider in relation to studying children and childhood
- Under the positivist paradigm children are seen to be dependent on and subservient to adults. Draws on biology and notions of 'weakness'. Is that true?

What do we then need to consider?

- Race
- Class
- Gender
- Linguistics
- National orientation

- 20th century – emphasis on male experts of psychology on the subject of childrearing
- The impact of television
- Positivist view of childhood is one of surveillance, monitoring, and social regulation
- *'In the positivist paradigm children are passive entities who must be made to submit to adult decisions about their lives' (Spigel, 1988)*

A new paradigm for a new childhood

- Technological, socioeconomic, globalization and other factors all mean that we need to reconceptualise how we look at childhood
- We can no longer see childhood as a transitional arrangement and instead see that it is a time worthy of study within its own right
- Children as active agents of change within their own lives
- Children construct their worlds and are constructed by them also
- Argument exists that corporate children's culture has replaced school as the central curriculum of childhood

Task

- Are we experiencing a crisis of childhood in your opinion?
- Consider how modern society, technology and contemporary culture are impacting children. Is this positive or negative and is there anything we should be doing about this in your opinion?
