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The features of modern childhood; how adult assumptions and expectations shape the lives of children in the UK.

Childhood and children's lives are constructed by societies expectations and cultural context; the main factors that shape these constructs are adult assumptions, expectations and authority and the historical, economic and cultural context of the time. Indeed, Waller argues that views of the child are not fixed but unique in nature and continuously evolving, and 'childhood may be defined as the life period during which a human being is regarded a child and the cultural, social and economic characteristics of that period' (2009, p. 2). Although, discussions of children's education can be traced back to the earliest philosophical writings of Plato, Aristotle and Confucius, which focused on children as future adults and what the ideal could be (Clark, 2013), there are many writers who advocate childhood as a modern phenomenon of more recent times. One such author is Postman (1994) who traces the invention of childhood with the development of technology, namely the advancement of the written word, that for the first time differentiated the way in which children and adults communicated, and meant childhood began to be seen as a separate time for learning. However, the many features that dominate contemporary childhood emerged not just from these developments but from post-industrial Britain. Where middle-class Victorian sentiment distanced children from the work place and introduced universal and free schooling for all and then the rights and technology driven changes of the 20th Century. These changing conditions have given birth to the childhood of Britain today, the inherent right of all children, which should be enjoyed from labour, centred around schooling until eighteen, with rights to protection and participation and access to information and communication unlike any generation before them.

In contradiction to the contemporary understanding of childhood in the UK, children have, and in many countries around the world still are, considered workers. For the clear majority of children in pre-industrial Britain it was taken for granted that they would work as soon as physically able, mostly alongside their parents within regional industries, to contribute towards the family upkeep but also to keep them out of trouble (Clark, 2013). Towards the end of the 17th Century and into the 18th the Industrial revolution in Britain meant huge growths in capitalist industries, a demographic shift towards larger towns and cities, and with it the need for a cheap labour force, that fulfilled market demands and progressed international competitiveness (Valkanova, 2014). Indeed, opponents to legislation that eventually regulated child labour, argued that the employment of children ensured Britain remained competitive among the international market. Furthermore, with these economic changes production became centralised in factories and mills, which favoured child employers not only because they were cheap to employ but because often their size was advantageous to the work; For example, children's smaller and more nimble fingers made them more effective in tasks within the textiles industry. Increasingly, children began working away from their parents and where subjected to exploitation and incredibly harsh working conditions (Clark, 2013).

These conditions acted as a catalyst for public concerns and subsequent Factory acts that sought to regulate child labour during the early nineteenth century; there had been an emerging cultural understanding that childhood was at least in part a time of play and physical development that contributed to successful adulthood, and that the children in work were not receiving these opportunities (Cunningham, 2005). Indeed, within Victorian culture childhood was a persistent theme, and literary works such as Dickens and Kingsley, drew attention to the predicament of the country's working-class children. However, this imagery was accompanied by that of Queen Victoria and the royal family, as the picture of family life, private, doting parents and innocent children with a sentimentalised form of childhood, which at a time of monumental social and technological disruption took hold of public ideals for a nostalgic way of life from a simpler past with such significance that the sentiment remains to this day (Clark, 2013).

Ultimately, reformers advocating changes to child labour laws saw the large-scale exploitation and 'brutalization' of children abhorrent and a symptom of intense industrialization that undermined the 'natural order', instead furthering an ideal of childhood that was appropriate for a 'civilized and Christian nation' (Hendrick, 1997, p. 40). Therefore, against the background of this cultural context several Factory Acts were passed in 1819 and 1833 and a Mines Act 1842 in England that progressively limiting the age a child could enter work within several industries and regulating the hours they could work, even introducing the requirement for children over nine in the cotton industry to receive part-time education (Clark, 2013). As children became increasingly marginalized from the work place, a consensus emerged within British society that children under 10 should be in some form of education, but that educating all children would be the most effective solution to the threats of child idleness and poverty on the 'respectable' classes (Clark, 2013, p. 25).

In 1870 the Elementary Act, which was to start a twenty-year development of the UK education system, made arrangement for the education of all children from five to thirteen, with school boards appointed to manage and complete a network of schools that were all to be brought under supervision. Before this act, schooling had been largely dependent on background, location and religion with massive inadequacies in many parishes, however free education was not provided, and provision remained inadequate. Further acts in 1880 and 1891, compelled Local Authorities to enforce the compulsory attendance of schools and penalized those parents if families whose children were illegally employed, whilst significantly declaring elementary education was to be provided free of charge (Gillard, 2011).

Today in Britain there is a universal acceptance that children are educated to at least sixteen, some do choose to work, but this is highly regulated with very few instances where a child's income contributes to the household income. The vast majority of children in the United Kingdom on a part-time basis and combined with schooling (O'Dell et al., 2013). However, children who are carers to their family members demonstrates the burdensome and unpaid work that children in this country are sometimes faced with at home. In 2001 the census found

that at least 175,000 children could be classed as carers, 35,000 are of primary school age and 4,000 of these provide more than 50 hours a week of care (Becker, 2010). Certainly, the experiences of these children challenge the contemporary understandings of a normal childhood in Britain. and highlights the socially constructed nature of the concept and the fact it only truly exists within societies that recognise it as a concept in its own right (Clark, 2013).

Moving on, throughout the 20th century there was a significant shift within sociological perspectives of children and their lives, as well as legislation of children's rights. Historically, children's voices have held little resonance in society, they have been largely ignored and their lives solely explored through the perspectives of their adult counterparts (Christenson and James, 2008). Traditionally sociological and psychological perspectives constructed children as incomplete, passive rather than active subjects, they were once thought of as what they could not do, as simply human becomings, being capable socially and intellectually only when an adult. Indeed, Lee (2001) concluded that only full-formed human beings are taken seriously, and children are often denied full citizenship rights simply because they are not yet an adult, in fact children were not mentioned in human right conventions, established as early as 1948, until 1989. Despite this, in recent decades there has emerged an understanding that children can be extremely competent and should have authority over their lives (Langsted, 1994). There has been a recognition of the child as an independent being, in their own right, a concept that Bruce (2005) believes should underpin all practice in the Early Years sector and a central principle of the Early Years Statutory Framework where it details the need for all practitioners to respect the individuality of the child, to value the 'efforts, interests and purposes as instrumental to successful learning' (DfE, 2017, pp. 10-11).

The most significant advancement for Children's rights has been the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child, that empathetically expresses the growing consensus of the 20th century, that children do indeed have rights. After a long and complex process, the convention was adopted by the General Assembly in 1989 and was subsequently ratified in all but three-member countries; America, South Sudan and Somalia. The convention included both the more traditional protection rights and the more contemporary participation rights, the latter having shaped the goals of many government and non-government organisations since ratification (Thomas, 2014). Most notably, Article 12 specifies the rights for all children to participate in decisions that affect them, both within their lives, education and within research (UN, 1989). The Children's Act 2004 furthered this concept by establishing commissioners to promote and safeguard children's rights, to be a voice for these rights independent from government and hailed a step towards basing policy and services on the rights and wishes of children not just adult perceptions (DfES, 2004).

However, despite these advancements there is still much debate over the effectiveness, scope and appropriateness of participation rights; Handley (2009) argues that these rights have had limited effectiveness because there is conflict between the images they portray of a competent and capable child with the imagery of protectionist rights, of a vulnerable child, needing

protection, an image that fits much more securely within traditional constructs of childhood, such as those of the Victorian era. Moreover, the competency of children has been discussed by many sociologists in recent years. Purdy (1992) argues that children are not competent enough to exercise participation rights and should not be allowed these rights until adulthood. In contrast, Landsdow (2005) asserts that adults often underestimate a child's competence, and that competency must be assumed unless it can be shown otherwise, similarly Archard (2004) distinguishes 'libertarian' interpretation of children's rights as an ideal starting point, by granting children maximum freedoms and equality with adults, challenges are made to justify any restrictions on the liberty of children. Certainly, writers such as Scraton (2004) conclude that children are still evidently subordinate, likening their status to a minority, whereby adults command and children obey. In support, Jenks (1996) discusses the time in which children in developing country spend in care, how receiving extended education and the economic stability of their parents as factors which increase the dependency of Western children for much longer than their international counterparts.

In addition, age is often used as a representative for competency, James and James (2008) assert that it is important to distinguish between age and competence, that it does not strictly increase with age but instead a child must be given opportunity to develop and practice competence (Leverett, 2008). In agreement, Alderson (2005) argues that certain developmental paradigms focus on child's immaturity and lack of development compared to what they can contribute and achieve. However, children, as young as they may be, do have views, opinions and perspectives that can be missed because of adult's inability to recognise their queues or because children's understandings are underestimated due to age. Undeniably, young children and even babies express themselves in a number of ways, Malaguzzi (1996) contests that although difficult, parents, practitioners and other adults must be respectful, take account and implement ways to acknowledge the hundred languages of children. Similarly, Lancaster (2010) counters that there is a need to create a culture of listening, that policy makers and government officials must create a culture of including children and their perspectives within decisions.

One example of children as active citizens is within Reggio Emilio schools, which herald's children as citizens of their community and cultures, within settings children are viewed as active, capable and worthy of rights. The setting's structure and practitioners involve children as decision makers in their learning; their interests and fascinations are used as the driving force for their learning opportunities with a strong emphasis on community (Jackson, 2014).

Ultimately, these conditions have given birth to a new image of children as active, knowledgeable and participating in society, which has according to Prout (2005) acted as a catalyst for a growing public concern that children are unruly, less biddable and more difficult to manage or troublesome than their predecessors. Indeed, towards the end of the 20th century and moving into the 21st there was an unprecedented rise in concern for both the damaging effects of contemporary life on children and their childhoods. These concerns are present in

both public opinion and published works that charge many factors, such as children's desire to grow up too fast, the corrosion of the child-adult relationship and the effects of advancements in technology, for the perceived erosion of childhood (Clark, 2013). There has however always been acute concern and adult anxiety revolving around childhood throughout history, Hendrick (1997) details the rising worry within Western culture for children and their childhood for over a hundred and fifty years since the government took ever greater responsibility of where and how children spent their time. Despite these considerations, Childhood in recent times has 'moved to the forefront of personal, political and academic agendas' (James et al., 1998, p. 5), it has undeniably 'become the crucible into which is grounded each and every adult anxiety' creating what Brooks has described as 'a time of child-panic' (2006, p. 16).

Crucially, these concerns have emerged against developments in what has been labelled the 'risk-society' and people's warped perceptions of the dangers and risks that are present in their lives and the world around them (Mayall, 2002). Unlike ever before children are restricted from the outside world because of parental fears around stranger and traffic danger, but also because they themselves have been excluded from many public places due to the perceived threat their presence evokes (Valentine, 1996). These factors have driven increased investments in entertainment media by parents that keeps their children within the home and sheltered from outside hazards (Hutchby and Moran Ellis, 2001).

Furthermore, technological advancements and the effects on both children and childhood has been one of the most debated subjects of the last few decades; writers such as Palmer (2006) who accredited the growing use of media and communication technology among children for creating a toxic childhood. The most prevailing view within this discourse is that of Postman (1994) who believed Childhood has disappeared because of developments such as the television and internet, the traditional boundaries that distinguish childhood and adulthood had been eroded. Television, as a visual media, is easily accessible for all ages and therefore imparts knowledge equally to both child and adult, something Postman believed was exposing children to the 'secrets' of adulthood. The internet had furthered this idea, as children can now access information and knowledge to an unprecedented degree, and unlike any generation before them. Postman suggested that these conditions and the rising number of criminal acts committed by children, as well as rising alcoholism, drug taking and sexual acts among children are symptoms, that have contributed to the disappearance of childhood. In this way, the concept of childhood has arrived full-circle, resembling the childhoods of the middle-ages whereby there was little distinction between adult and child abilities and access to information (Smith, 2010).

However, this view has been staunchly criticised among many commentators and sociologists, the position has been deemed technological determinism and fails to take into account the complex and varied way in which children experience media (Cunningham, 2005). In fact, Guldberg (2009) counters that the negative connotations that have been assigned to television, that it is detrimental to children's physical health, learning and relationships, is supported by

very limited empirical evidence. Additionally, Lee (2001) details how television can actually draw a child into the public world and has been indispensable in assisting the developing awareness for children as active social participants. Likewise, Papert (1993) believes the computer has transformed children's learning and Tapscott (1998) argues that children using the internet have become 'more creative, democratic and self-aware' (Cited in Clark, 2013, p. 128). Prensky (2001) has gone as far as to describe children as digital natives, accustomed to technology and interaction with it, whereas adults who have not grown up with such circumstances are digital immigrants, living within a foreign setting, where they must learn a language and culture unfamiliar to them. Moreover, Katz argues that:

'Children can for the first time reach past the suffocating boundaries of social convention, past their elders' rigid notions of what is good for them' (1997, p. 174).

These rigid notions dictated by adults, have been widely criticised as the driving force behind the rising public dismays for the state of childhood; Buckingham (2000) denounces such arguments for the disappearance of childhood as exaggerated and reflecting a romanticised, nostalgic view of children and what their childhood should be. Children's experiences of childhood today are drastically removed from that of their parents, which has led to an attempt to recreate the circumstances of their own idealised and nostalgic memories of childhood, but also the image of the ideal childhood that dominated discourses of the 20th century (Jenks, 1996). The reality of childhood has never achieved this ideal, and has only ever been experienced by a middle-class minority (Marsh, 2005). In this way, adults are viewing, documenting and reporting the way social and technological changes have affected childhood through their own perceptions and experiences.

In conclusion, the societal and cultural expectations of children and childhood within the United Kingdom has been significantly affected throughout history by economic, cultural, societal and technological developments, in such a way that it can now be seen as the 'barometer of the nation' (Goldson, 2001, p. 34). The views, perspectives and values of adults have shaped fundamentally what is considered the ideal childhood but has also driven reform, education policy, children's rights and the growing public anxieties surrounding the state of modern childhood. Children are ultimately at the will of the adults that shape their lives to such an extent that 'unless ethical and legal values and principles are upheld and implemented by the citizens within society then children will be unable to exercise their rights as active participants' (Evans and Goodsir, 2016), a principle that has become so central for Early Years practice. As childhood is constructed in such a way, its reconstructions can be viewed throughout history, during key periods of transition, such as the development of the universal education system, the revolution in children's rights throughout the 20th century and incredible technological advancements of the 21st century. Conclusively negating any case for the erosion or disappearance of childhood and instead highlighting the flexibility and variability of childhood as a social construction.

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