Contemporary Childhood and the Institutional Context

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Abstract

Recently, research on the child and childhood as a social and cultural phenomenon has been approached from the position of multidimensionality and extreme complexity. Childhood, as opposed to the beliefs of the majority of adults, is not an isolated, protected, well controlled and predictable manner of guiding a child towards the adult world. Childhood is more focused on the general perception of child and suggests the existence of a special, separate and fundamentally different social group and category. A child's status as seen from the adult view and its culturally and historically defined construct changes and varies with its definition of the physical and/or sexual maturity, legal status or age group affiliation. The concept of child and childhood deals with the individual, usually defined from the point of view of an adult person. Two extreme views of children and childhood are related to the concept of designing, modeling, building and desirable socialization, or emphasizing the concept where a child is considered as the main agent of childhood. The institutional preschool context with all its segments (culture, curriculum, financial and social determinants) can encourage, empower or reduce all those advantages and potentials that childhood carries. In that sense, childhood does not exist beyond the social context, and its reflexive representation becomes evident in the dynamic relationships and divergently structured educational conditions.

Key words: *contemporary childhood; history of childhood; institutionalization of childhood; preschool child; preschool institution.*

Introduction

> *Childhood is an invention of adults, a reflection of their needs and anxieties. Throughout history, children have been praised, protected, ignored or despised, depending on the assumptions of the adult culture.*
>
> *(Walkerdine, 2009, p. 64)*

Children of today grow up in a culturally diverse, socially complex and technically highly developed world. The referring point for discussion and socio-pedagogical view of childhood was Aries's work "Centuries of Childhood" published in 1962 which deals with childhood from a historical perspective and figurative art. In recent times (over the last one hundred years) a child is observed within the framework of a specific discourse and departs from being treated as "the little person".

In repeating the key social, cultural, and economic factors which defined the specific and recognizable discourse on childhood Kellett (2010) describes an interest in childhood in the early 17th century when an initial debate on the position of child and its nature was initiated. It starts with Locke's empiricism and moves on to Rousseau's romantic image of childhood as an idyllic time filled with joy, protection, independence and dependence. The industrial period places a child into the world of work rather early, but at the same time opens some new areas of interest relating to the child and childhood – children's rights, concern for child health and development. Somewhat later, owing to intensive research in the area of developmental psychology, a child is placed within the existing phases of development which are characterized by specific thought, communication and influence of a child's environment. Standards in the function of defining levels of "normality" in children with respect to dominant developmental criteria disappear.

The work of James, Jenks and Prout (Kellett, 2010) shows a duality in contemplating childhood from two basic paradigms: developmental psychology and sociology. In that respect, the authors differentiate between several models of childhood. The model of "developmental milestones", the traditional model defined through the theory of developmental psychology according to which a child moves from one to another phase of development, defined by norms, standards, competences, deviations and pathologies. Childhood enables the process of growth and development which is partially formulated through thought and cognitive competences. The "tribal child" model looks at a child through social components and autonomy in a cultural context integrated with a child's perspective. "Children are not observed as "pre-operational" or "pre-moral" or "pre-something" else" (Kellet, 2010, p.15). Their competences are specific and do not have to be congruent to the adult world. This perspective clearly differentiates childhood from the adult world. The third model looks at childhood from the perspective of "the grown child" where grownups and the child are still separate entities, and the perspective of the adult world is the main point of interest. Children are perceived as less important in comparison to adults. The fourth model is the "social child" based on the thought that childhood is a phase of the life cycle where children are actively engaged in everyday activities and are observed as actors of their own identity "A child's competences are accepted as different, not inferior. Children have a unique identity as social actors in the changed social and cultural context" (Kellett, 2010, p.15).

Deconstructed ideas of childhood come as a result of various contemporary studies which defined this segment of the cycle of life as "an isolated and protected space from

the adult world where children hold a special place and participatory rights". They create an idea of a child as an individual and autonomous being within the framework of liberal and humanistic assumptions.

Contemporary Controversies on Childhood

Traditional beliefs of childhood and children that we approach with a degree of fear, desire and phantasy, seem to have permanently lost meaning. The status and symbol of childhood as we once knew it is becoming extinct. Its sanctity and innocence has been tainted and there are no indicators showing an improvement for the better. Childhood, in the context of contemporary scientific discourse, is observed as a relative category construed of adults hiding an abundance of contradictory memories, wishes and myths. Literature informs us of the many controversies that emerged in the perception of that period as a biological and social category which reveals all the dynamics of relationships between adulthood and childhood, expectations and their realizations in the contextual conditions.

Over the last two decades, childhood theoreticians (anthropologists, sociologists, pedagogues, psychologists and others) attract attention to the disparate views on the notions of "children" and "childhood" based on various research on children at an early age, various points of view and educational practices (McLeod, 2008).

> *"Depictions of childhood are a continuous effort of the adults to take control over childhood and everything that the notion of childhood implies, and not only take control over children but their own childhood which they mourn over and over again."*
> *(Holland, according to Buckingham, 2000, p. 10)*

Discussions on the contemporary concept of childhood seem to move within the framework of claims about childhood extinction, rushed childhood and a child that is emotionally unprepared to cope with the dynamic and stressful way of life, with the media and fear of failure (Elkind according to Lynott & Logue, 1993), of "children without a childhood" (Winne, according to Saracho & Spodek, 2013) or of poisoned childhood (Palmer, 2006) which relates to the technical, technological and computer science advantages of a society with evident consequences on growing up. A child is, furthermore, defined as a "grownup on hold" (Russell, 2006; Kellett, 2010), and childhood as a period in which it is not seen as a unique human being but as something that will eventually become one.

Winter (2006), and James and Prout (according to Kehily, 2009) view children as "adults in the making" and believe that adults focus on what children cannot rather than what they can do. The view of children as "the ones in the making" increases the orientation on children in the future, considering that they represent "the ones who are not there yet". At the same time, it is said that children, according to national statistics, are invisible, and that they are a population group which is mute at that social level, and yet adults as a dominant group seem to maintain their mute status.

Adults try to control the image of childhood advocating a separation of childhood and maturity, so as to keep its innocence, that is, the cultural construction of childhood serves adults to maintain its idyllic vision (Lancy, 2008). Characteristics of children are, at the same time, considered a great developmental potential (the golden age of childhood), but are also considered as problematic assumptions of growing up. To adults, childhood represents a wonderland to which they can retreat pressed by everyday responsibilities of maturity (Saracho & Spodek, 2013), childhood, in other words, is used to maintain the maturity status on the account of children.

Relating to the present-day West, there are arguments that globalization and neoliberalism created a situation of extended childhood and in that way an extended dependence of children on adults. Lee (according to Walkerdine, 2009) believes that, on the one hand, economic and social movement created the disappearance of borders between adulthood and childhood, and the "disappearance of childhood" is a result of an increased economic interest aimed at children who are becoming interesting to the market. In that way, due to the social and cultural transformations between childhood and adulthood, the borders become less transparent, defined and universal.

Childhood – A Universal or Specific Socio-Cultural Construct? Or Both?

Childhood as a distinct and universal phase of development of specific characteristics is a persistent part of the myth which promotes the concept of timeless dimensions and unaltered developmental essence.

Aries's historical discourse of childhood has been relatively late in prompting thought aimed at the scientific-pedagogic concept of childhood, its social character and interdependence of social, political and economic structures, beliefs, values, customs and laws as well as their practical implications on the institutional and non-institutional context. That kind of an approach is not correct viewed from the historical perspective, nor is it culturally colored, lacking class, racial and gender differences (Polakow, 1992). Anthropologists, in particular, have pointed out the significance of cultural differences and the cultural relativity of this period of human development. "The universal child is an impossible piece of fiction considering that it is defined through its culture and biology (orthogenesis)" (Montgomery, 2009). In contemplating the characteristics of a contemporary image of child, Bašić not only rejects the universality of childhood as social expectations "are not universally applied" (Bašić, 2011, p. 31). Childhood is very mobile and changeable, various societies within various time frames expressed distinctive ideas of childhood which have been reconstructed over again with the creation of a new image of child.

Childhood cannot be viewed as a neutral category, and evidence to that are anthropological studies which show that childhood does not come with specific programs, characteristic of a particular culture and area and it is not considered omnipresent and universal. Childhood is socially construed and experienced

differently by different children, as the category "childhood" depends on gender, social class, ethnic belonging and other dispositions (McLeod, 2008).

Individual, varied, and complex experiences and reminiscences of childhood from a temporal distance often contain a romantic perspective of growing up and such a narrative construct does not ensure a universal understanding of the phenomenon of childhood or a standardized approach (Pelo, 2006; Bašić, 2011).

In the ontogenetic development a child is a unique and specific being and in addition to the personal biography is defined through general social visions and values. In that sense, the standpoint of Vygotsky is significant (according to Broadhead, Howard & Wood, 2010) trying to establish the thesis on the close correlation of the cultural-historic context in which children live with some characteristic child or childhood activities, such as child play. On the example of its emergence and development, some universal aspects (of biological and psychological components) can be recognized (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2007), however, with visible cultural variations.

New social studies on childhood (from either the historical or social perspective) and the prevailing concept of childhood established that the life of children is formed through social and cultural expectations of adults. A child's growing up depends on many factors in addition to the child itself. Children should be seen as active participants in the construction of their social reality, and not be mere passive receptors of a culture given to them by their parents (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2007; Mcleod, 2008).

James and Prout (according to Jenks, 2009) identified several basic ideas of the contemporary childhood paradigm:

1. Understanding childhood as a social construct in which natural and universal characteristics of a human being emerge as unique structures and cultural components in various societies.
2. Childhood is a variable of sociological studies and analyses where comparative and cross-cultural analyses reveal various types of childhood rather than individual or universal phenomena.
3. Consideration of and understanding of childhood takes place within the framework of children's rights – independent and unique.
4. A child is observed as an active construct of its social life (not merely a passive participant of social structures and processes).
5. In light of all that has been mentioned a reconstruction of childhood which will have broader repercussions on the growing up of children is necessary.

Early Institutionalization and Contextualization of Childhood

"Cultural values communicate to children through the educational system and other informal experiences" (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2007, p.105).

The context in which children live, develop and learn represents an expression of ideas about the culture of childhood and is a significant agent in the construction of their identity.

Research and findings of neuroscience today provide relevant insight into the nature of the brain, its complexity and plasticity in all brain systems and the instability of the concept of permanent intelligence. "The biological capacity requires an adequate context, material and rhythm so as to enable achievement and express development (Vecchi, 2010, p. 18). The new image of a child and childhood and their conceptualization suggests changes at the level of pedagogical practice and a different positioning of a child in the adult world.

The social and historical framework speaks of the altered image of a child and childhood (Bašić, 2012), of the necessity to treat children simultaneously as natural, biological and universal beings within the framework of specific cultural variations and the individual historical context (Jenks, 2010).

In his book entitled the Theory of Childhood, Mooney (2013) meticulously analyses basic theoretical standpoints of John Dewey, Maria Montessori, Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky which have marked learning and development of children at an early age. The common denominator of these progressive theorists is focus on the child who in interaction with concrete social environment realizes its potential. In that way, the education of children at an early age is a process and not preparation for a future life (J. Dewey), the institutional context with its organization and planned materials are a foundation for the development of autonomy and for meeting the child's needs (M. Montessori), the first phases of a child's development are "windows of opportunities" and critical phases of childhood (E. Erikson). A child passes through universal phases and therefore it is important to become aware of how knowledge is created and in that sense it is construction upon construction (J. Piaget). A child is an autonomous being and it is viewed from the prism of social constructivism as the theoretical foundation of childhood (L. Vygotsky).

Pelo (2008) analyzes the imbalance between the image of contemporary childhood and its institutionalization and the contradiction between idea and pedagogical action through which the concept of childhood is realized. It emphasizes that traditionally early childhood relates to play, an active, creative and carefree relationship towards reality which is not the dominant approach in institutions for early and preschool education.

Institutionalization of childhood, according to Dahlberg and Moss (2005), should not be lead by a romanticist and nostalgic paradigm. The image that we have of a child is defined by the material and social intervention through which a child then creates a relationship towards the world and develops a complex system of personal abilities, personal maps of its cognitive, social and affective orientation, and forces itself to become active and productive, create symbols, compare and contemplate (Rinaldi, 2006). The institutional context as a very lively and dynamic organ (Slunjski, 2008; Miljak, 2009) is a reflection of the norms, dominant values, beliefs and expectations of the basic culture in which the institution exists. The context in which children live, develop and learn represents the expression of the idea of the culture of childhood and is a significant agent in the construction of their identities. The educational context

is a meeting of interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary constructions of childhood; it is a "distillery of knowledge" about child and childhood (Vecchi, 2010, p. 97). In the institutional context, various images of the child, theories of learning and development within a specific cultural context are being conceptualized (Montgomery, 2009).

Institutionalization of childhood can support paternalism and age segregation creating conditions of a fragmented social surrounding, protected and controlled by adults. "The organization and leadership of a public educational institution is defined by cultural, anthropological, ethical and aesthetical choices and a long-term vision" (Vecchi, 2010, p. 61). The author mentions that the context in which children grow is not merely a passive and static transmission of some culture but is interpreted into a new social and cultural reality and implies understanding and personal reflection of preschool teachers.

Huges (2010) points out the correlation of children's activities (play in particular) and the creation of contextual conditions for a healthy childhood and competence maturity. The quality of learning at an early age is the result of the quality of conditions in which they live (Slunjski, 2011, p. 198). Social and material surroundings, the structure and organization provide a child with a subjective processing of experiences, personal understanding of reality with the help of the adult as a mediator between child and "source of experience".

The institution enables a child to independently and in cooperation with other children and adults, develop, supply, and revise its knowledge, experience, deriving it through the mental construct of the rich experience and applying it in new situations. The holistic approach to observing a child takes into consideration various discourse and interpretations which are not necessarily competitive but complementary and inherent.

The democratization of relationships assumes such a culture of the institution where children actively participate through free all-encompassing expression, with bold values related to human rights, tolerance, solidarity, etc.

Final Considerations

The construction and reconstruction of contemporary childhood stems from the fact that child is a self-determining factor, an agent of its own development which reflects the interactive dimension of child as a biological and psychological being and the social and cultural context in which he or she lives. The conceptualization of childhood moves from emphasizing spontaneity, unconventionality, auto-expressiveness, imagination, flauntiness, yearning for autonomous work, taking advantage of the visible plasticity and ability of development of children at an early age and preschool age as opposed to the other extreme emphasizing discipline, restriction and reductionism.

We advocate observing childhood as a separate, well thought up, organized and well used period in which a child functions as a proactive, creative being who is a social actor with rich and varied potentials. Such an approach to a child generates new and intentional conditions of socialization and curricular modification.

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Suvremeno djetinjstvo i institucijski kontekst

Sažetak

U novije se vrijeme istraživanju djeteta i djetinjstva kao društvenom i kulturnom fenomenu pristupa s pozicija multidimenzionalnosti i iznimne kompleksnosti. Djetinjstvo, nasuprot razmišljanju većine odraslih, nije izoliran, zaštićen, dobro kontroliran i predvidljiv način vođenja djeteta prema svijetu odraslih. Djetinjstvo se usredotočuje više na generalnu percepciju djeteta i sugerira postojanje posebne, odvojene i fundamentalno različite društvene grupe i kategorije. Status djeteta osmišljen od odraslih i njegov kulturološki i povijesno određeni konstrukt mijenja se i varira od njegova definiranja fizičkom i/ili spolnom zrelošću, pravnim statusom ili dobnom pripadnošću. Koncept djeteta i djetinjstva bavi se pojedincem kojeg obično definiramo s pozicije odrasle osobe. Dvije krajnje perspektive djeteta i djetinjstva vezane su uz koncept usmjeren na oblikovanje, modeliranje, izgrađivanje, poželjnu socijalizaciju ili naglašavanje koncepta prema kojem se dijete razmatra kao glavni agens djetinjstva. Institucijski predškolski kontekst sa svim svojim segmentima (kulturom, kurikulom, materijalnim i socijalnim odrednicama) može poticati i osnaživati ili smanjivati sve one prednosti i potencijale koje djetinjstvo nosi. U tom smislu djetinjstvo ne postoji izvan društvenog konteksta, a njegova refleksivna reprezentacija dolazi do izražaja u dinamičnim odnosima i divergentno strukturiranim odgojno-obrazovnim uvjetima.

Ključne riječi: *institucionalizacija djetinjstva; povijest djetinjstva; predškolska ustanova; predškolsko dijete; suvremeno djetinjstvo.*