A critical examination of how adults’ concepts of childhood have informed the proposed recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review

Kylie Sleep

Adults’ ideas about the most ‘appropriate’ childhood to experience have and will continue to affect the way in which children are treated. By providing a historical overview of the education system in the United Kingdom, I critically analyse how children are seen as society’s future investments, as objects of social control and as innocent beings in need of protection, and I show how such concepts have informed the key recommendations of the recent Cambridge Primary Review. I conclude by stating that whilst children themselves may have changed over time, it is adults’ conceptions of childhood that have been subject to the most significant change.

Key words: childhood, concepts, education, Cambridge Primary Review.

Whilst children themselves may have changed somewhat over time, what is subject to even greater change are our concepts of childhood (Morpurgo, 2006). It was Aries (1962, in James and James, 2004) who first raised awareness of childhood as a social construction. Although it may not always be immediately clear, what we often see are adults imagining, constructing and reconstructing ideas about childhood, with children having to face the consequences (Hendrick, 1997). Interestingly, Morpurgo (2006) claims that this is due to the fact that we can only define our adulthood, or what makes us an adult, if we distance ourselves from childhood. Only when they are conscious of the fact that there is something called ‘adulthood’ do individuals begin to reflect on the concept of childhood. Thus, it is clear to see how the adult’s self-construction of his or herself is, at the same time, a construction of the child (Kennedy, 2006).

Exploring the history of educational practice in the United Kingdom allows us to see how adult concepts of childhood have influenced the processes and purposes of schooling. In other words, the gradual move from a traditional rote learning method to a more progressive or child-centered approach has been considerably shaped by ideas regarding children as objects of social control, as investments for the future world of work, as vulnerable beings in need of protection and as innocent individuals who should be free to experience the wonders of the natural world (Kennedy, 2006).

I believe that an effective and contemporary context in which to discuss the nature and development of these concepts is to critically examine how they have informed the key recommendations of The Cambridge Primary Review. I aim to focus on the following proposals - putting an end to the state theory of learning, the scrapping of Standard Attainment Tests (SATs) and league tables, support for the disadvantaged child and an
extension of the Foundation Stage to age six (Hofkins and Northen, 2009). This assignment will provide a succinct understanding of some of the many ways in which children and childhood are seen by adults, how these ideas have and will continue to affect the treatment of children and in what ways they have shaped an appealing vision for primary education today.

From the romantic discourse stems the idea that children naturally demonstrate a state of innocence, purity and goodness. The pioneering work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762/1978) claimed that children were held close to God. Rousseau stressed that children are vulnerable, and, as a result, should be protected from any potential harm or evil that might impair this innocent individual (Kehily, 2009; Gabriel, 2007). This would then enable them to express themselves freely and creatively amongst natural surroundings.

The tabula rasa discourse was first introduced by John Locke (1693), who claimed that children were born as ‘blank slates’. The idea is that children are consistently involved in the process of becoming adults. The type of adults they develop into depends on the type of environment they are exposed to during childhood. Consequently, it is the role of existing adults to administer appropriate education and control to assist in the formation of mature and responsible citizens (Kehily, 2009).

The puritan and evangelical perspectives vilify children. They are seen as sinful beings and threats to society. Even Plato and Aristotle believed that children fall into the same group as the sick, insane and wicked (Kennedy, 2006). It has been claimed that the concept of ‘evil’ lies beneath the surface of children, and this belief has long traditions within educational institutions (Warner, 1994 and Scraton, 1997, in Kehily, 2009). Hannah More, an evangelist and founder of the Sunday school movement, stressed the importance of education in order to eliminate such evil from children (in Hendrick, 1997).

Whilst over time particular concepts of childhood have appeared dominant over others, Fogel (2001) reminds us that none have ever existed exclusively. Particular beliefs and attitudes stem from others, and as a result, they overlap across the history of educational practice to the present day.

The Cambridge Primary Review is the largest independent inquiry into English primary education since The Plowden Report of 1967. Published in October 2009, the review was led by Professor Robin Alexander, spanned three years and drew on the work of over three thousand researchers (Mansell, 2009; Ward, 2009). The three underlying considerations were children and childhood, the society in which children are being raised and how primary education can best meet the needs of children today and in the future (Hofkins and Northen, 2009). Before discussing adults’ concepts of childhood in relation to the key recommendations of the review, I feel it necessary to mention that the purpose of the review itself tells us a great deal about present attitudes towards children. Duncan (2009) implies that there has seldom before been such a wealth of research into the notion of childhood. This complements Hendrick’s (1997) view that before 1800, adults’ awareness of childhood was not apparent, as there was no desire or concern for childhood to be understood. What we are now able to see is the idea that childhood should be celebrated in its own right. Adults are filled with anxiety about the future of childhood. This has resulted in the notion that children are now worthy of research which will hopefully provide the most effective provision for their education. Nonetheless, we will see how this is just one of the many concepts that differs immensely from previous educational practice.
The nineteenth century saw the provision of schooling being dominated by government bodies, as opposed to churches which had previously taken on this role (Cunningham, 2005). Elias (1998) describes school as a partial result of the defunctionalisation of parents, as the once authoritative structure of the family gave way to the government. A Justice of the Peace (in Hendrick, 1997) warned that there was no way to force civilisation downwards in society other than through the system of education. The State was able to transmit a precise set of middle-class values and beliefs to the working-classes, thus maintaining the continuation of social hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1971, in James and James, 2004). In other words, schooling was a process which, through centralised policy, labeled children as passive recipients in order to create a universal image of the respectable individual. This undoubtedly brings to light the adult concepts of social control and investment.

It was important that children were to be both economically and politically productive (Kennedy, 2006). What is key here is that children were not appreciated for who they presently were, but who they would become. Understandably, Hendrick (1997) highlights that the schooling system facilitated a whole new construction of the child. He or she was no longer a capable wage-earner, but a school pupil who represented a state of ignorance. Consequently, children became a marginalised social group due to the public opinion that their proper place was in the classroom.

To the middle-classes, education seemed like the ideal way to draw children of the working-classes off the streets and to train them to conform to morally acceptable norms. Education was to cater for the so-called ‘needs’ of the working classes, which included conformity, punctuality and sanitation (Hendrick, 1997). A concept which also informs this exercise of social control is the puritan view of original sin. Many believed that education was the only way to prevent young delinquents from demonstrating potentially dangerous characteristics. Hendrick (1997) states that this was part of an attempt to generate a national childhood, which did not reflect rural/urban divisions or social class. Nevertheless, there was concern that this would then close the gap between the working and middle classes, thus posing a significant threat to social order (Gittins, 1998).

The authoritarian role of the teacher was always evident in traditional educational practice. Classrooms had to be orderly and effective enough to educate as many working-class children as possible at the same time. This ensured that all pupils were occupied and could be monitored consistently and coherently (Brancaccio, 2000). It has also been suggested that the classroom environment was designed to avoid disturbances from delinquent children, who it was hoped would then provide less of a threat to educators (James, 2007). As Fisher (2008) reminds us, teachers saw children simply as empty vessels to be filled with standardised knowledge. We can see how this ties in with John Locke’s (1693) *tabula rasa* discourse, but in a much more ‘mechanical’ spirit. A notion that I find particularly interesting is the assumption that all pupils would be willing and able to comply with the teacher’s demands at the same pace (Brancaccio, 2000). At this time, little attention was given to individual needs and interests.

Measuring educational attainment was also a fairly straightforward process. Badley (1905, in Bruce *et al*. 1995) illustrates this, claiming that methods of teaching were planned with reference to what would be demanded of children in future examinations. He made it clear that whilst testing was used to analyse the success of teaching and for the sake of the school, the main purpose was for investment - for the reproduction of employees and for the child’s moral benefit. James and James (2004) agree, further stating that examinations, which were
introduced in 1862 from the age of six, played a fundamental role in the implementation of centralised social control.

Interestingly, as far back as the nineteenth century, Dewey (1899, in Kennedy, 2006) stressed that the purposes of schooling did not reflect the radical changes in social circumstances. The mid-1800s saw a partial willingness to view the child as a person in his or her own right, as opposed to children who were simply part of a social group (Hendrick, 1997). For example, the Newcastle Report of 1861 recommended that a sound primary education should be provided for all children. Further evidence that began to illustrate a gradual challenge to the concepts of investment and social control can be seen in the Hadow Reports, published from 1918 to 1944 (Gillard, 2007). In particular, The Primary School (1931, in Gillard, 2007) claims that a successful school ‘…is not a place of compulsory instruction, but a community of old and young, engaged in learning by cooperative experiment’ (1931, in Gillard, 2007, p.9). This said, Galton et al. (1980, in Gillard, 2007) argue that the traditional emphasis on the mass teaching of literacy and numeracy remained evident up to and including the 1950s. It was not until 1967 that the Plowden Report proposed the most explicit child-centered or progressive view of education that was previously unprecedented (in Fisher, 2008). Plowden claimed that the child is the focal point of the education process. Evidently, we can see how adults began to question the absence of the child’s voice as never before. There appeared to be growing concern about both the dominant roles held by the teacher and, more crucially, by the government. Even today, findings from The Cambridge Primary Review state that we should reconsider the relationship education has with social progress (Hofkins and Northen, 2009).

Hence, a key recommendation of the review is to put an end to the explicit state theory of learning that many, including myself, feel still exists. According to Darling (1994, p.2), the vision for a more progressive view of education stems from a ‘radical dissatisfaction’ with traditional pedagogical methods. It has been said that schools are overwhelmed with government initiatives, and whilst the Early Years Foundation Stage (DCSF, 2008) and the National Curriculum (QCA, 2000) appear effective in theory, they are not so effective in practice (Hofkins and Northen, 2009). Daniel and Ivatts (1998, in James and James, 2004) note that, as in previous times, teaching places unwelcome focus on what children ought to become once they reach adulthood. After critically analysing the two aims of the National Curriculum, Jones et al. (2008) highlight that whilst it does illustrate a somewhat progressive view in the respect shown for the individual child, what still remains is the apparent need to ‘…prepare all pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life’ (QCA, 2000, p.11). Because excessive priority is being given to targets that children are required to achieve, a very narrow curriculum has been created (Gabriel, 2007). I particularly value Katz’s (1993, in Moss and Petrie, 2002) view when arguing that early childhood provision is again in danger of becoming based on an intensive factory or industrial model, as in the nineteenth century. This claim is supported by The Good Childhood Enquiry (2009, in Duncan, 2009) which reported that last year, the United Kingdom ranked twenty first in the top twenty five most industrial countries in the world, in terms of children’s wellbeing on a range of measures.

Hall and Øzerk (2008, in Layard and Dunn, 2009) and Hofkins and Northen (2009) comment that English school children are still the most tested in the world. In order to raise standards, and therefore still maintain the concepts of social control and investment, the government introduced Standard Attainment Tests (SATs) in the early 1990s. The results of these tests are available through generalised league tables, which do little to dismiss the notion of a national childhood as I previously mentioned (Hendrick, 1997). The idea that parents
examine these league tables in order to identify the ‘best’ schools leads us to a rather evangelical view, which claims that children are prone to delinquency and should be guided into adulthood in the best way possible (James, 2007). Layard and Dunn (2009) propose that we should pay more detailed attention to the child’s circumstances when considering these results, including their performance when they first entered the school. In stark contrast, The Cambridge Primary Review recommends the abandoning of SATs and league tables altogether, stating that it is good teaching, not testing that raises standards in schools (Hofkins and Northen, 2009).

Ultimately, the vision to lessen the state theory of learning and to scrap pupil testing and league tables has been fuelled by a significant shift of adults’ concepts in relation to investment and social control. What I see is the need to appreciate children as holistic individuals with their own distinctive learning needs and interests. Children should be active participants engaging with active learning opportunities. The idea is that childhood should be relished as a time in its own right (Hofkins and Northen, 2009). Schooling should be an enjoyable experience in which children are appreciated for who they are, and not only what they will become. Less of a focus on centralised aims, outcomes and purposes is called for, hence a recent headline from The Times Educational Supplement which demanded that the government ‘give us back our schools’ (Ward, 2009, p.1). A child-centered approach will see the teacher as a facilitator of knowledge as opposed to a controller of a rote learning method (Soler and Miller, 2003). One of the few criticisms of this idea is the concern that the teacher’s role will be too undermined, which suggests that a fear of the child as a threat still exists (Fisher, 2008). Nonetheless, Mansell (2009) declares that the review’s recommendations will be welcomed by many teaching professionals, who believe that whilst well overdue, a counterargument to decades of top-down government intervention is what is needed.

To compare the past and present use of social control in order to narrow the gap between the middle and working classes is a little different. Ward (2009) claims that central to The Cambridge Primary Review’s vision is the concept of the disadvantaged child. The review states that society is still divided, and that fundamentally, education should benefit ‘…those who lack the massively compensating advantages of financial wealth, emotional harmony and home life’ (in Ward, 2009, p.26). Imperatively, it is the role of education to intervene quickly in order to bridge the divide between disadvantaged children and the rest. Government initiatives such as the Narrowing the Gap (C4EO/LGA, 2008) project, which aim to assist schools in fulfilling this role have been highly praised by The Cambridge Primary Review. What I feel this shows is that a degree of social control is still thought to be necessary for children, as in previous educational practice (Hendrick, 1997). Nonetheless, whilst some children may remain to be seen as a threat, what it clear is the idea that childhood is now under threat.

Thus, discussing the concepts of social control and investment leads us to additional perspectives on the past and present treatment of children. We can see how the need to minimise the gap between vulnerable children and the rest is also driven by the concept of nativism. This illustrates the adults’ desire to protect children from the evil and destructive world around them (Johnston and Nahmad-Williams, 2009). Hendrick (1997) describes how prior to the eighteenth century, there was little evidence of opposition to child labour. It was thought that the wage-earning child was made aware of numerous economic, social and moral values necessary to be a responsible and effectively invested citizen. Nonetheless, a gradual shift in opinion resulted in children being seen as victims, denied their childhood as they had
been forced into employment. Although challenged by many subsequently, education was therefore seen as a way of allowing children to reclaim their childhood, as it protected them from the harsh working conditions they had previously been exposed to. It is unsurprising then that Popkewitz (1998, in Moss and Petrie, 2002) stresses that a recurring theme in education is the need for planned intervention to ensure that children are rescued from potentially destructive economic, social and cultural circumstances.

This said, Brancaccio (2000) has brought to my attention a theory that saw this adult concept brimming with ulterior motives. The harsh reality is that even though education was said to be a means of protection against child labour, children still remained victims whilst at school. They were now seen as innocent victims of the social control and investment opportunities that the government had forced upon them through the process of schooling. Critcher (2002) also relates to this claim, suggesting that modern debates about childhood have become invested with a growing sense of apprehension. Thus, Critcher (2002) claims that an idealised view of the innocent child has been constructed through the emotional instability of adults.

Kehily (2009) claims that rather than an intrinsic part of childhood, the innocent child is solely an adult construct. Nonetheless, Rousseau (1762/1978) emphasised the importance of children who were born with an intrinsic source of purity and natural goodness. I have previously mentioned the idea that children should experience what it was like to be a child, to experience a wondrous childhood, before becoming an adult (Hendrick, 1997; Gabriel, 2007). Rousseau’s (1762) *Emile*, describes a child who is free to express himself in the natural environment, driven only by his own curiosity and interests. Emile was not obliged to master skills such as reading or writing until at least his adolescent years (Gabriel, 2007). It was thought that the child’s instinctive desire to play should be cherished. Rousseau (1762) saw the constraints of society as often limiting children’s ability to develop at their own pace. Thus, it is clear to see how he also favoured a child-centered approach, with the central aim being expression as opposed to repression (Johnston and Nahmad-Williams, 2009). Aries (1962) concurs, claiming that the introduction of schooling and rote learning marked the end of the golden period of childhood, illustrated in Brueghel’s (1560) painting of *Play*.

Rousseau’s (1762) ideas have greatly influenced the beliefs of many others, some of which are illustrated within the arts. I particularly enjoy *The School Boy* (Blake, 1789/2004, p. 32). We can clearly see how the poet Blake uses the metaphor of a bird to reflect his opposition to both the current processes and purposes of the education system -

‘How can the bird that is born for joy

*Sit in a cage and sing?*

*How can a child, when fears annoy,*

*But droop his tender wing*

*And forget his youthful spring?’*

But we should not forget that the concept of the child as innocent is subject to conflicting definitions by adults. In contrast, the puritan idea sees the child as the root of evil. According to Bruce *et al.* (1999), adults have passionately argued for either one side or the other throughout the history of the British education system. Demos (1970, in Gittins, 1998) and Greven (1970, in Gittins, 1998) describe childhood as a battlefield in which parents fought to instill morally good values in order to save their children from damnation.
Interestingly, there is also the idea that children are born as natural sinners who have the potential to become innocent following baptism. Hence the reason Gittins (1998) notes that the child of innocence has frequently been linked with Christianity. Puritans emphasised the need for close supervision of children from an early age, actively discouraging play as it was thought that it encouraged a child’s disobedience which ‘…counts not only as a domestic offence, but also a species of tyranny and affront to the laws of religion’ (Richard Baxter, in Gittins, 1998, p. 149). Moreover, within Some Thoughts on Education, Locke (1693) suggested that children acquire the determination to create mischief as a result of observing others. He therefore took rather unkindly to schools, suggesting that the tabula rasa could be tainted by a number of bad influences (in Cox, 1996). Kehily (2009) claimed that once the child’s innocence has disappeared, their childhood disappears with it.

It is clear to me which adult conception appears dominant at present. The most powerful British image today is that of a poor, weak and needy child; a child who is vulnerable and susceptible to harm if s/he is not protected by love, care and attention. Something that I had not greatly contemplated before is the idea that the younger the child, the more innocent they are seen to be (Moss and Petrie, 2002). We can see how this concept is illustrated profoundly in relation to The Cambridge Primary Review’s key recommendation to extend the Foundation Stage to age six (Hofkins and Northen, 2009). Mansell (2009) notes that a misconception occurred in that many media reports declared it was thought children should not begin schooling until six. In fact, the proposition was that formal education should not commence until this age, thus suggesting a greater emphasis on play-based learning in the earlier years. One explanation obviously appears in conjunction with a desire to diminish social control and the idea of children as investments (Hendrick, 1997).

The review highlights that both parents and teachers stressed five was too young an age for children to begin compulsory schooling. It is thought that many teachers feel obliged to ensure that very young children are beginning to understand concepts of literacy and numeracy. Thus, the adults are seeing children as vulnerable innocents, who are being victimised as they should not be forced into structured forms of education. Many children are not thought to be achieving the standardised goals set for the early years, which results in their precious confidence being significantly undermined (Hofkins and Northen, 2009).

It is argued that children need plenty of time to develop positive dispositions towards learning. They should be given an abundance of space to engage with active play experiences within a safe environment, hence the concept of genuine protection being maintained. This will then enable the children to freely explore and investigate at their own pace (Hofkins and Northen, 2009). I can see how this undoubtedly mirrors the beliefs of Rousseau (1762/1978), although he would have perhaps suggested that play-based learning should continue until at least the end of the primary school years!

The ways in which adults’ concepts of childhood have informed ideas about the most suitable provision for children has had and will continue to have a significant effect on their educational and broader life experiences. The key recommendations of The Cambridge Primary Review provide a contemporary context in which to discuss how these conceptions have developed across educational history, and how they have shaped an independent vision for education that is thought to best meet the needs of children today (Hofkins and Northen, 2009). I have illustrated how the underlying perspectives of the review itself illustrate what we mean by childhood and why it is important that it is researched.
Starting from the conceptions of social control and investment, I have critically analysed traditional methods of education, in which children were required to engage with a rote learning process in order to shape them into productive citizens for the future (Brancaccio, 2000; Kennedy, 2006). A more progressive view of education is now desired, which recommends the ending of government centralised control and the abandonment of SATs testing and league tables (Hofkins and Northen, 2009). It is thought that children should be appreciated for who they are as individuals, with unique needs and interests which should be catered to unconditionally. Whilst the need to narrow the attainment gap between vulnerable children and the rest does suggest that a degree of social control should remain, what is also apparent is that these children are now seen as innocent victims in need of protection (Hendrick, 1997; Ward, 2009; Johnston and Nahmad-Williams, 2009). I have identified a clear comparison between the conception of innocence promoted by Rousseau (1762/1978) and a desire to extend the foundation stage to age six. It is now seen as important to encourage children to freely engage with play-based learning opportunities in order to aid their development as naturally good characters (Moss and Petrie, 2002, Hofkins and Northen, 2009; Johnston and Nahmad-Williams, 2009).

As a final thought, I am confident that throughout this assignment, I have succeeded in demonstrating Morpurgo’s (2006) claim - whilst children themselves may have changed somewhat over time, our concepts of childhood have been subject to even greater change.

References


