



Cultural Politics and the Role of Rights in Childhood

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to bring into discussion how cultural politics shapes society and political opinion, to give rise to social, economic and political realities in the role of rights in childhood and whether, or not, the culture of childhood is considered important in research and policy development. This article provides an appraisal of three significant points that are recognised as important in the context of childhood. It starts by considering the culture of childhood, then encompasses the meaning of childhood, and asks if there are differences between cultures? The second consideration presents the importance of the culture of childhood and children in research, specifically in terms of the benefits to children and society, as well as the benefits to academic research, which can influence policy development. Finally, the importance of childhood culture in policy development is considered in the light of how it is reflected in the law and in children's rights and the cultural politics of childhood.

KEYWORDS: childhood, children, childhood culture, children's rights, education,

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I. INTRODUCTION

The interest in the study of culture is a very important topic owing to the fact that culture surrounds us from birth. Culture determines all our actions and behaviours, such as how we eat, how we greet one another, and how to speak. Culture is of importance in human life and influences us from the childhood stage. Because of this importance, many scholars have afforded their attention to this subject. Johanson (2010, p. 390) emphasises the importance of childhood culture studies by mentioning that, 'over the past 40 years, studies of childhood in sociology, cultural and media studies have embraced the concept that children are not simply adults in training but are the creators and recreates of social relations and culture in new and interesting ways'. For example, Butler (2008) cites that in Rio de Janeiro there are three concepts of children's participation with NGOs, who work with children, and he emphasises that one of them depends on the media. This kind of participation allows children to express themselves by dancing to the Afro-Brazilian music and several young people have taken up photography. These activities will be apparent in all city areas. According to that, some organizations highlight their events through different types of traditional communication media such as: TV, radio, printed press (Butler, 2008). This example showed how children create their culture way to express themselves. Therefore, in an effort to understand the culture of childhood, it is necessary to identify the meaning of culture and accordingly to explain the power of culture in influencing people—and especially children. From the writer's own past experience as a foreign student in the UK, many behaviours that were totally contrasting to those normal in the writer's own culture—even in terms of simple things, such as how to greet people—were witnessed. It is for these reasons that the decision has been made to focus on this subject.

Three main points have been selected for attention. Firstly, effort will centre on seeking to provide answers to the following questions: What is the meaning of childhood, children and childhood culture? Are there any differences between cultures? What is the cultural politics of childhood? The second point presents the importance of the culture of childhood in research, specifically in terms of the benefits to children and society, as well as in regards the benefits for research. Finally, the importance of childhood culture will be demonstrated as is reflected in the law and in children's rights: the cultural politics of childhood. To conclude, whether or not the culture of childhood is considered important for research and policy will provide a point of discussion.

II. CULTURE OF CHILDHOOD

2.1 Definition of Childhood, Children and Childhood Culture

Undoubtedly, it is important to start this article by defining the terms ‘childhood’, ‘children’ and ‘childhood culture’. Childhood may be considered one of the most important stages of human life because of the strong tendency of the child to be influenced by different factors surrounding him/her and effect his/her growth, in general, as well as their characteristics, skills, talents and abilities more specifically. A range of factors deeply influence a person’s future character (Adas, 2001).

‘Children’, according to Brookshaw (2009), is a word used to describe a group in relation to the norm (adults), and which covers a large number of individuals whose abilities and levels of dependence span a wide range. Furthermore, he adds that this period differs from one country to another, depending on many factors, one of which is culture. This diversity is responsible for differences in children's lives, such as the cultural expectations for children’s capacities in their society from an adult’s point of view.

According to Christensen & James (2008), childhood culture refers to the different ways of social acting and behaviour for children within social institutions, such as school and family. It also takes into account how children manage their everyday lives. It is worth mentioning that, nowadays, there is much debate concerning children's cultural rights around the world, with this subject important for the children themselves (Stephens, 1995). Cole et al. (2010) state that the culture of childhood is created by children themselves at a very early age, notably before the age of five and before they attend school. Qvarsell (2005) explains that there is much discussion pertaining to culture and early childhood learning, the child as an individual, and children’s rights within different cultures. Therefore, there is a need to consider the physical, psychological and social environments in which children are being raised. In the same vein, James & James (2004) provide examples pertaining to the social side of childhood, and further illustrate that there is a need to consider how children should be dealt with and handled in terms of their needs, skills and rights. Such factors are affected by culture and globalisation.

An example of cultural change is the type of leisure activities performed by children. In the past, children spent more time playing outdoors and creating their own games; nowadays, however, many children prefer to play indoors, using the internet and playing video games. Culture plays an important role in children’s lives because it influences their skills, knowledge and behaviour, and the way they understand the world. Accordingly, children’s culture changes with time and with each era, and has a strong impact on children’s lives (Thomas, 2000). Along the same lines, Brookshaw (2009) mentions that the most common tool for children is toys because they can invent different ways of playing with their toys, with such ways emerging from culture. Qvarsell (2005) mentions the point of view of William Corsaro—an ethnographer and child sociologist—that suggests that children are able to work and think at the same time in an effective way, with this ability helping them to support their perspective of childhood in many ways—one of them being potential culture. This example shows the importance of culture in childhood.

2.2 Cultural Differences

It is well known that cultures are different—even in the same society (Thomas, 2000). For example, the ‘magic words’, notably ‘Please’ and ‘Thank you’, are extremely important in Britain, whereas in other countries they might not have the same level of importance.

Further to this, there is another question that comes to mind: Is children’s culture limited or not? Johnson answers this question by stating that it ‘should not be limited’ (2010, p. 389) between children themselves and with adults. Furthermore, culture is considered a process of production because it is a continuous process built by humans over generations (Stephens, 1995). Johnson (2010) explains many writers’ perspectives about culture: one of them is Mouritsen, who divided children's culture into three concepts, depending on who produces the child’s culture. The first group contains adults with educational aims, which encompasses various types of children’s media, such as television programmes. The second one concerns the participation between adults and children, and how they can present culture. This could include children’s after-school activities, such as dance classes, for example. The last concept is children themselves, who can make their culture through playing games. Thus, children’s culture is produced by adults, adults and children, and children themselves.

It is clear that culture is changeable, with older generations unable to protect their children from these changes because they emerge from their different experiences. There is therefore a need to seek cultural identity for children by understanding their rights (James & James, 2004). Children who grow up in a diverse cultural system will have cultural influences from different places, especially if their parents emigrated from their home country. These children will see different social roles, and this situation can create a dilemma for parents because they may be concerned about what their children’s identities will be (Stephens, 1995). Sometimes, children become confused and ask themselves: What is our culture? Which culture should we follow?

Thomas (2000) explains that, with this variation of culture, differences in children's personalities will be a natural result. As Mead stated, for example, the Samoans raise their children without any feelings of shame, give them responsibilities that are suitable and aligned with their age, meaning that, when they grow up, they will act as they have learnt from their culture.

2.3 Cultural Politics of Childhood

The cultural politics of childhood involves a mix of national, cultural, social and political factors that, together, construct childhood in any society. It refers to a combination of factors that create the unique experiences of childhood in a particular society and at a particular point in time. The cultural politics of childhood are important because many decisions are made for and with children in any society, and so there is a need to develop an understanding of childhood as a social/cultural construction first. Furthermore, this reveals the ways in which diversity affects all children's everyday experiences of childhood (James & James, 2008).

Johanson (2010) explains the appearance of cultural policy in some countries, such as Denmark, Finland and Norway, throughout the period spanning 1960–1975. He divides the issues pertaining to children's cultural rights into five issues, as set by the Danish Ministry of Cultural Affairs in 1975. The first one relates to children's values, which develop as the child grows. Secondly, children are different in terms of abilities and skills, which depend on their surrounding culture, along with other considerations, such as age and maturity. Furthermore, children are considered part of a future generation, which plays a participating role in the structure and building of tomorrow's culture. Moreover, it was added by the scholar that Danish children must protect their culture from multinational influences in order to feel a sense of cultural identity.

James & James (2004) show that cultural politics have a very significant role for childhood and help us to:

1. Understand childhood and to see the place of each child in any group.
2. Understand the relationships between childhood and adulthood, develop the concept of generation, and improve these relationships.
3. Create a social and political framework for research.
4. Form society's institutions, such as school.
5. Understand children as participants in any institution, such as in terms of their role as a member of the family, for example.
6. Deal with children, socially and culturally, in society, shaping their lives through manners and traditions, for example.
7. See each child as a social actor in the collectives of children.
8. Recognise the uniqueness of each person's childhood.

III. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CULTURE OF CHILDHOOD IN RESEARCH

We must not be ignorant of the various benefits involving children in research. Laws & Mann (2004) explain the benefits for children, research, and society. However, these benefits will be divided into two sections, with benefits for children and society discussed together, predominantly owing to the fact they are related to one another, with benefits for researchers presented separately.

3.1 Benefits to Children and Society

Laws & Mann (2004, p. 14) mention that involving children in research is considered a 'political act' because laws and children's rights must be taken into account.

Research helps children to realise their abilities in different areas. Cultural research emphasises social development, with children able to form relationships with new people and learn from these relationships. Children may learn from one another or face new social challenges, such as how to act normally with other children or how to be hard-working and motivated adults in the future. Furthermore, they may learn new skills, such as how to solve problems and how to cooperate, share ideas, communicate, improve their logical thinking, or learn by trial and error. Research helps children to collect information from their new friends or to become more confident because they feel that they have helped researchers. In addition, this kind of research strengthens the relationships between children and adults because both act normally, without any rules, and learn from one to another (Laws & Mann, 2004)

3.2 Benefits for Research

There is a difference between researchers' perspectives concerning children's participation in research, with some of them based on culture, as can be seen in the work of Hart (1994), who claims that children's participation in any country depends on their culture and on parents' nurturing philosophy. Moreover, Punch (2002) considers that the correct way of having children participate in research is through the use of traditional

methods with them, such as observations and interviews; however, technique simplification is appropriate for children. Cook & Hess (2007) mention that the inclusion of children in research, as participants, presents the researcher with unexpected findings because children give researchers the opportunity to understand their world—the world of a child. Laws & Mann (2004) illustrate that children can give adults ideas for new material. For example, they can tell them to use the latest technology in their research to record data. Moreover, children can help the researcher in the results of their research if they like the subject or if it stems from their experiences, and they can sometimes renew the problem in vital way. In the same way, children may develop new insights that can help the researcher to choose better data, to simplify the analysis processes, or otherwise use children in collection of the data.

IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF CHILDHOOD CULTURE IN POLICY

Two main points will be identified throughout this section, namely the role of law and the rights of children.

4.1 The Role of Law in the Cultural Politics of Childhood

The aim of this point is to explain the idea of the role of the law in the cultural politics of childhood and to further explain various laws in more detail.

James & James (2004) state that law may be defined as the regulations within societies that influence how they are organised as cultural and political systems. It is considered one of the most important basic elements in the cultural politics and social structure of childhood. This importance is given to law because it illustrates the key features of childhood, such as the legal ages for school attendance, for example; in any society or country, this will differ depending on the cultural politics of the particular country.

James & James (2004) explains the concept of law as a process to organise society and protect social structure by reflecting the accepted social behaviour. In this respect, law plays an effective role in defining rules to protect children. The following are some important points about law:

1. Law helps people to organise their lives, manage their relationships, and are used in all areas of children's lives, such as in the rules in the playground or classroom, for example.
2. Law controls the continuous changes between past, present and future to suit each generation and each era.
3. Law plays an important role in strengthening the relationship between system and agency in the social order.
4. Law works in a hidden way to recognise the social behaviour of children and is considered to be of fundamental importance in the way in which the child is understood.
5. Many areas of society need to be managed, controlled or limited, such as in terms of freedom and rights. Law meets this need for any group of people, whether adults or children, or children and children.

4.2 The Role of Rights in the Cultural Politics of Childhood

There is no doubt that the UNCRC does many important things for children's rights and does so in many different areas. It makes rules about how we can protect children and how we can provide an appropriate environment for the future development of all children in all parts of the world. This convention has outlined 40 articles, which aim to cover the needs of any child, and focuses on rights regarding the globalisation of childhood (James & James, 2008).

Articles 20 and 29 on the UNCRC website illustrate the importance of culture. In Article 20, mention is made that people who look after children should respect the child's culture. In Article 29, the importance of education is highlighted, along with the view that children should be encouraged to respect their own and others' cultures.

James & James (2008) explain that the nature of children's rights and childhood are a part of the vested interest for the children's rights motion. This issue makes up a significant part of the UNCRC and is considered to be an international matter. Childhood studies attempt to present a globalised model of childhood, which helps in developing an understanding of the different experiences of childhood around the world. Children's experiences of the culture around them are crucial in shaping who they are; these experiences are different from those of children's parents because of the changes of culture from one generation to another. Furthermore, rights for children will differ from country to the next because of the variety of rules in different societies. It is not surprising, therefore, that any right is related to culture and nationality. For example, the right to vote is not present in some countries because of the specific governmental system. It is extremely difficult to define what is right for children in different societies with different cultural backgrounds and expectations.

4.3 Example for the Relationship between Law, Rights and Cultural Politics (Education)

James & James (2004) look at various factors, such as health, the family and education, as case studies, and accordingly explain the relationship between these factors and the law. Education has been chosen by the writer in this study in mind of illustrating this kind of relationship.

The UNCRC set Articles 28 and 29 for a child's right to education, which means that they understand the various aspects of the developing child, such as personality-building skills, the way to improve personal culture, preparing the person for adult life, and how he/she can face the challenges of adult life. If this points to anything, it is the importance of education and how it plays a vital role in childhood structure and children's position in society.

The UNCRC defines education as an important key in the idea of global childhood and the rights related to all children. This confirms the role of education policy, law and the cultural politics of childhood, and how they are connected to one another. For example, in the UK, children start primary school at age five, whereas in Saudi Arabia they start at age seven. This illustrates how culture plays a role in education law. In the UK, the age at which a person is considered independent is earlier than in Saudi Arabia, and so people are required to complete their education at a younger age in order to face life's challenges.

V. CONCLUSION

This article has provided an idea pertaining to three essential points that are recognised as important in childhood studies, namely the culture of childhood, the importance of the culture of childhood in research, and the importance of childhood culture in policy.

The findings demonstrate that the culture of childhood is formed because parents have their own culture at home. Parents have the responsibility of setting up their own culture and providing a suitable environment for their children; in this respect, childhood culture is a response to children's needs. Furthermore, this essay has highlighted the important role adopted by cultural politics in understanding children and stressing their social role in societies. In addition, it shows that the culture of childhood is important for research by presenting some of the benefits for children, society and research in the culture of childhood studies, and stresses the effective role of children in society and in sociology studies.

However, the policy of any society includes laws and rights, with a strong relationship identified between them. The culture of childhood is important for the implementation of laws and plays a role in children's social construction and in their futures. Law is the means by which children's rights organisations seek to protect children and give them their rights around the world.

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