CHANGING IMAGES OF CHILDHOOD – RECONCEPTUALISING EARLY CHILDHOOD PRACTICE

Reesa Sorin
James Cook University, Australia

Abstract:

During the early years of life, children experience a number of transitions as they grow and develop, and move from home to care and education. To support young children during these times, early childhood practitioners may need to make transitions of their own; in the way they view children and childhood, and in the practices they undertake based on their views. Viewed from a Reconceptualist perspective (Lambert, 2003), this paper presents ten constructs of childhood (Sorin & Galloway, 2005) and identifies ways in which they may be present in early childhood practice. Yelland & Kilderry (2005) argue, "one of the aims of education is to prepare citizens for the 'real world', and the 'real worlds' of today are multi-faceted and often the issues that arise are not easily solved but instead need to have multiple readings and interpretations" (p.11). The paper challenges practitioners to critically examine how these constructs affect their own practice and, where necessary, to change their views and actions toward young children.

Introduction

Since Froebel's 1837 introduction of the Kindergarten Movement, the image of the child as innocent has been a dominant construct in early childhood policy and practice (Branscombe, Castle, Dorsey, Surbeck & Taylor, 2000; Woodrow, 1999). Described as a "mythological idealised view" (Hilton, 1996 in Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett & Farmer, 2005, p. 14), this construct views children as incapable, powerless and in need of adult protection. Childhood is seen as a time of passivity, where children receive knowledge and experiences chosen and provided for them by their adult caregivers. But other, less dominant images are also visible in early childhood policy and practice, including the notion of agency embodied in the Reggio Emilia movement and the construct of the child as adult-in-training in accelerated early childhood programs (Woodrow, 1999).

In Early Childhood Education, the Reconceptualist movement has developed in the past 25 years as a response to dominant discourses in the field that offer limited room for change and individuality (Woodrow & Brennan 2001 in Arthur et al., 2005) and frame education and development as universal. Examples of such discourses include Developmentally Appropriate Practice and child development theory (Arthur et al., 2005). Practices that create power for some children and families while marginalising others become a focus for challenging "public discourse that has historically and without shame used 'children' to further political agendas" (Cannella, 2005, p.20). But, as Yelland and Kilderry (2005) caution, this does not mean that we must abandon current pedagogy; rather we need to recognise the changing contexts of early childhood and rethink pedagogy and practice to suit new demands. "It's not enough to adapt within the norms of the past. We need to discover profoundly new ways of perceiving the world in which we live" (Theobold, 2005 in Yelland & Kilderry, 2005, p. 244).

If indeed the innocent child is the dominant construct in early childhood education, then does this mean that all children should be seen as innocent and all adults as protectors of innocence? Are there other childhoods possible and other ways for adults to respond to and program for children? Implementing a template of childhood that presents ten different constructs (Sorin & Galloway, 2005), this paper suggests ways in which these constructs may be present in early childhood practice. It asks practitioners to recognise the historical, political and social nature (Cannella, 2005) of these constructs, to identify events where they may be

present in their practice, and to question whether these constructs create power for some groups (for example, adults) over others (for example, children), and if so, what steps could be taken to change the situation (Yelland & Kilderry, 2005).

Childhood by Ten

The term, "childhood" is generally recognised as a socially constructed phenomenon (Arthur et al., 2005; Cannella, 2005; Sorin & Galloway, 2005). Chronologically, childhood has been variously described as: the period from birth to 6 or 7, when the child can articulate clearly; birth to when the child can reproduce; birth to when the child can work; and birth to when the child can live independently of the parents (Branscombe et al., 2000). According to the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989), childhood spans birth to the age of 18. Yet the age of consent, the voting age, the age when a driver's licence can be held and the age when compulsory schooling can be terminated vary with location, culture, and dominant adult voice. Invariably, the voices of children themselves do not come into consideration when these life transition points are decided.

Historically, there tended to be three dominant images of the child: the innocent child who comes into the world as a "tabula rasa" (blank slate) to be gently acculturated by omniscient adults; the evil child, a product of their parents' intimacy, who must have the evil beaten out and replaced by good; and the "miniature adult" child who lives and works alongside adults who are essentially the same, but larger versions of the child (Woodrow, 1999). But these images alone do not cover the varying ways that children and childhood are constructed by adult society. Other ways of constructing childhood include: the noble/saviour child, the snowballing child, the out-of-control child, the adult-in-training, the child as commodity, the child as victim and the agentic child. Each of these ten constructs is described below, with examples given relating to early childhood practice, and critiques to challenge thinking and move practitioners to possibly reconstruct how they view children and childhood.

The Innocent Child

Childhood as an innocent, pure time of life separate to adulthood is an image that has been present since the late Middle Ages. Along with the carefree existence of the child came the dependence upon adults to meet all their needs (Branscombe et al., 2000; Hutchison & Charlesworth, 2000; Wood, 2003). Froebel's metaphor of *kindergarten,* the "garden of children", positions children as seedlings, in a state of natural goodness, to be cared for and nurtured as they blossom into adults (Aries, 1962). Documents concerning children, such as the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and codes of ethics regarding children tend to operate from this vantage point, stating that in all actions towards children, "the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration" (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989). Yet the best interests are determined not by children, but by their adult counterparts.

In the early childhood classroom, this construct is visible in practices of censorship, or sheltering children from the real world. We metaphorically as well as literally cover children's eyes when images of violence, death or sexuality inadvertently present themselves in the media. The books, videos, games and activities we choose for children are often sanitised to present some aspects of life while excluding others. For example, stories with witches or monsters are often excluded from early childhood bookshelves because, in the teacher's view, they might cause fear or anxiety in children (Sorin, 2001). Learning environments are often constructed in such a way that they not only protect children from harm, but also shelter them from acting with agency in favour of the adult who "knows

better." Practitioners could consider expanding the environment while still considering safety issues, but offering children more choices in what is included and how things are utilised.

The construct of childhood innocence comes at a price - it positions children as incompetent, vulnerable and dependent; a blank slate ready to be moulded by adults. While a need to protect children from harm is a very real concern in these violent and terror-ridden times, it is a concern that protection is becoming surveillance and control and children are not being given rights or opportunities to act on their own behalf (Dockett, 1998; Silin 1995 in Woodrow, 1999; Sorin, 2003). Steinberg and Kincheloe (2004) caution: "Children no longer live in the secret garden of childhood, [they] possess an open door to the adult world" (p.30).

The Noble/ Saviour Child

Like the innocent child, the noble/saviour child is good, but in this case also has the capacity to take on adult responsibility to the extent of saving others from terrible fates. Emerging in early Christian times with the recognition of the wisdom of the Christ child who eventually dies for the sins of others (Branscombe et al., 2000), this image persists in modern narratives in characters like Tiny Tim, the saintly crippled child in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol,* who offers his suffering and disability as a way of bringing people closer to God on Christmas Day, Harry Potter, who puts himself at risk for others, despite his own loss and suffering (Sorin & Galloway, 2005) and other child characters that become "superheros" in times of need. Also termed "parentified" (Diamond, 2004), these children "may have to fend a lot more for themselves than other children the same age. They may be cooking for themselves and other family members, or taking responsibility for household running in other ways" (NAPCAN, 2005).

This is the child who must make sacrifices for the good of others. In early childhood classrooms, where children are often perceived of as innocent and incapable, the noble/saviour child may appear more in fictional form than in reality. Children's dramatic play abounds with superheroes saving the day, rescuing the world from the forces of evil through emulating the words and actions of the current television hero. Superhero play can empower children, as it gives them a way to express frustrations and anxieties and come to terms with the good and bad in their lives (Anderson & Cavallaro, 2002). In reality, there may be times when children are positioned as mediators between the teacher and parents due to language barriers or other communication problems, between other children who may be having trouble getting along, or in other conflict situations. In some families, older children, even though they are still children themselves, may take over some of the caregiving roles towards their young siblings, making their lunches and making sure their bags are packed for school, when parents are unable or unwilling to do so. This child foregoes his or her own needs for the greater good, such as to help other children in conflict or to maintain harmony in the class. While helpers of this sort are usually appreciated by adults, positioning of children in this role may be better negotiated with, rather than expected of young children.

The Evil Child

In prehistoric and early Christian times, with the perception that children were evidence of their parents' intimacy, the image of the evil child arose. Children were thought to be born evil and in need of severe beatings to get rid of that evil so they could become mature, responsible adults. This construct allowed for practices of infanticide and incest to persist in Greece, Rome, Africa and China. Children who were considered less than perfect were drowned, exposed to the elements or starved. Later, infanticide was replaced by strong physical punishment to exorcise evil from the child (De Mause 1982, in Branscombe et al.,

2000). Through adult control, the child was thought to become obedient. This image may be a product of adult fear.

The child as evil is an underlying construct in reactive discipline policies and restrictive class or school rules. Some behaviours are rewarded while others are discouraged or even punished. These adult-initiated rules seek to restrict children themselves, as their "bad influence" is thought to affect their peers (often positioned as the "good" or "innocent" children) in adverse ways (Corsaro, 1997; Walkerdine, 1999).

In the early childhood classroom, the evil (bad or naughty) child is acknowledged with time-out chairs and removal from the rest of the children. Inclusion with the group is often achieved only through a realisation of the bad behaviour and a commitment of conformity to the adult's expectations of good behaviour. Adults in these situations could reconsider the benefits of excluding or removing children – will this actually reprogram behaviour or merely reinforce the "evil child" image to that child and other children in the class. Also, why are adult's expectations of good behaviour the only possibility? Behavioural expectations can be decided in collaboration with children and expected from all members of the learning community.

The Snowballing Child

When adult control slowly wanes, the snowballing child comes into his/her own. This child is not necessarily evil, but seems to be the one in control in the adult-child relationship, with temper tantrums a common response to not getting their own way. Considering the social conditions of the twenty-first century, where family structures have changed, single parent families are common, and most parents work (Kincheloe in Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2003), this image may have begun with the adult, tired and busy after a long day at work, giving in to the child's demands, to "keep the child quiet" and maintain peace within the family. As Kincheloe (in Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004) notes: "parents are still at work in the afternoon when children get home from school, children are given latchkeys and expected to take care of themselves" (p. 229). Perhaps in some ways this child is unwanted (Kincheloe in Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004), which magnifies the guilt adults may feel and the compensation they may make with material goods. Gradually and with similar, recurring situations, the child's power snowballs and the adult has less and less of a chance to stop it.

These children may be seen as "spoilt brats", surrounded by many things but still dissatisfied and wanting more. In educational settings, teachers may be puzzled by the obstinacy of these children, as they persist in self-centred or antisocial behaviours. To maintain some form of equilibrium in the class, teachers of these children may resort to bribery, offering stickers, points, money, toys or excursions in exchange for more pro-social behaviour. Teachers need to reconsider their reactions to snowballing children. While bribes may elicit the desired behaviour on a short-term basis, is this the best way for children to develop intrinsic behaviour patterns that will sustain them as long-term learners and citizens? Will these children, as they progress through their schooling, make even greater demands on their teachers, so that stickers will no longer satisfy and perhaps nothing less than bicycles or mobile phones will please them enough to maintain order?

The out-of-control child

While the snowballing child is still "manageable" to some extent (albeit through bribery and usurping some of the adult's power) and the evil child can be brought into line through strict disciplinary approaches, out-of-control children leave adults helpless, as they resort to

violence or self-destructive behaviours to get people to do what they wants them to do. They can be found in the pages of newspapers having committed violent crimes without being sanctioned for this behaviour (Robson, 2005). Often labelled "dysfunctional", these are the children who, after several failed attempts, the school system, and often family and friends tend to give up on. Some believe that out-of-control children are the product of attachment disorder, where failure to develop secure attachments to loving caregivers early in life has developed into "aggressive, controlling and conduct-disordered behaviours that contribute to the development of an anti-social personality" (Levy & Orlans, 2004).

The out-of-control child has no place in the "sanitised" environment of the early childhood classroom (as described above); s/he is not able to be "beaten into submission" and held as a counter-example to the innocent/good children. Abandoned by "the system" these children often end up in special classes or expelled from school altogether. They may turn to crime or other self-destructive behaviour (such as eating disorders or addictions) that will ultimately lead them to dysfunctional adult lives. It is this that positions them as out-of-control to adults (even those who would seek to help them) and ultimately out-of-control in their own lives.

But rather than abandoning these children, adults could examine their own expectations of these children. Are their violent and destructive behaviours a way of asking for help, guidance and caring? Are overall expectations of children within the educational system too restrictive? Have children been given a voice in what is to be expected within the classroom? By the time these children are cast out of the system, they have generally had numerous negative experiences with teachers, principals and other children that have coloured the way they see themselves and are seen by others. As the early childhood years are children's first experiences with schooling, this is an opportune time to initiate collaborations between children and adults regarding behavioural expectations and learning directions.

The Miniature Adult

In this construction, children are depicted as the same as adults, with childhood not considered a separate phase of life and neither child nor adult holding any real power. In Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, children of slaves worked alongside their parents, performing the same labour and enduring the same conditions (Branscombe et al., 2000). During the middle ages, children were depicted in art as having adult behaviours, proportions and facial features (Osborn, 1991 in Branscombe et al., 2000). With the onset of the Industrial revolution, children often worked long hours in less than optimal conditions in mines and factories (Branscombe et al., 2000). This image occurs today in countries where children's labour is utilised by the military or industry. In educational practice, particularly in early childhood education, this construction might underlie notions of behaving like a "big boy" or "big girl" (often by replicating teachers' modelled behaviour), classrooms furnished with "adult" furniture such as desks, high shelves and large pieces of equipment. Expecting children to sit at desks for long periods of time, absorbing knowledge rather than learning through a play-based curriculum could come from this image of childhood that does not differentiate the child from the adult. This image is similar, but not identical to, the image of the child as adult-in-training.

The Adult-in-Training

The child as adult-in-training implies that childhood is merely practice for adulthood; a time when adult skills and attitudes are being developed, often through a careful process of indoctrination, as children move from stage to stage until they finally reach the pinnacle, graduating into their roles in the workforce and the social order. Developmental theories, such

as those of Piaget, Erikson and Freud promote this image, as children move up the ladder of competence until they are fully "adult–like" (Hutchison & Charlesworth, 2000). Physical, cognitive and socioemotional milestones that explicate what a child of a certain age should be able to accomplish are further examples, particularly where children are labelled as deficit for not meeting developmental milestones (Woodrow, 1999).

This construct does not ignore childhood, but positions it as a step along the path to greater achievement. Children "are constructed as passive beings awaiting their temporal passage into the social world and the adult rational world" (Woodrow, 1999, p. 10). Adults-in-training are coached to achieve in academic tests and given extra help in the form of after school tutoring, music and sport training and stepped-up school curricula. The concept of learning through play is not a priority within this construct.

"Push-starting" children along the way to adulthood is a practice constructed and implemented by well-intending parents and teachers. But does it really address the cognitive, social and emotional needs of children? Would a six-year-old ever choose extra mathematics tutoring over an adventure in the park? Do high test scores really have the same value as play time with friends? Are children really just short adults, who value competition and achievement over just kicking around, being a kid?

The Child as Commodity

The baby in the flowerpot, the five-year-old beauty pageant queen and the children who appear in child pornography are examples of the child as commodity. They are objects "to be consumed by an adult audience" (Wood, 2003, p. 8). These children serve as marketing tools, advertising everything from baby clothes to toys, toiletries and adult accessories (of which they appear to be one). Greeting cards and calendars that use child images to draw on adults' sentimentality commodify childhood. While many of these images present children as innocent (eg. babies draped over pumpkins and sitting in cabbage leafs), there also appears to be a plethora of sexualised image of childhood, with young children dressed and made up to tempt adults sexually. Child beauty pageants feature young girls strutting the stage in heavily teased hairstyles, overstated makeup, jewellery, sequins and feathers reminiscent of a Kylie Minogue or Madonna performance. A child's best interest seems to have been forfeited in favour of adults' self-interest (Woodrow, 1999). While the child may have the illusion of power (for example, by earning a salary or having their picture in a magazine), s/he is ultimately powerless as it is the adult who is in control of the marketing of these children as saleable items.

In early childhood education, this construct seems to be largely overridden by other agendas, such as the innocent, evil or adult-in-training child (Sorin & Galloway, 2005). It can, however, be seen in end of year performances, where children are dressed up in cute outfits and drilled to remember lines or songs that they probably don't understand, but that serve to entertain the adult viewers of these performances and bring accolades to the teacher/producer. A glossy coloured school prospectus with beautiful children smiling happily on its cover uses children as commodities to sell the school to prospective families, as does the publication of test scores and child achievement awards. Teachers could reconsider these practices. Performances and art displays that are created by children offer wonderful opportunities for personal and aesthetic expression and rich insights into the world of childhood. Children are not saleable items; if their images are to be used, it should be with their, as well as their parents' permission. Giving children a voice helps to curb commodification and demonstrates that childhood is accepted for the very rich stage of life that it is.

The Child as Victim

The child is the victim of social and political forces; the child who lives through war or terror, famine or poverty, and goes largely unrecognised. The child as victim is voiceless and powerless, as are the adults in the child's immediate environment who are usually suffering alongside these children, if not absent altogether. To gain support for these children, their photographs are displayed in shopping centres, as passers-by are invited to choose one who "takes their heart" and provide financial assistance for that child. UNICEF reports yearly about these children, in their publication, *The State of the World's Children,* yet they are easily forgotten in our busy, everyday lives.

The child victim does not hold even an illusion of power; most would not be aware that their images are being used to generate sympathy and charity. And while their images may appear in colour posters or on glossy magazine covers, it is likely these images will be censored from other children, to protect their innocence against the evils of the world.

In Early Childhood classrooms, as in any other classrooms, there are child victims. These are the children who may live in poverty or neglect, who aren't trouble-makers or attention-seekers, and whose presence in the class is largely ignored. They may not attend excursions or be given text books due to the family's inability to pay the school. Their uniforms may be stained or patched and their lunches may be bland and unexciting (Marcotte, 1993, in Baxter, 1993). These children often feel unwelcome, judged or marginalised in the classroom (Baxter, 1993), but powerless to do anything about it. Rather than blaming parents, positioning both child and parent as inadequate, or wallowing in pity for the family, teachers could try to gain more insight into the situation and consider other ways of acting, that might help this child to gain agency in both their school and home lives.

The Agentic Child

This is a relatively new image of childhood; one that the Reggio Emilia movement has popularised and that many early childhood educators are adopting in their practice (Corsaro, 1997). It challenges the notion of the innocent, powerless child, as children are considered social actors who participate in their education and lives (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998) and co-construct childhood with adults (Corsaro, 1997). This is not saying that they are miniature adults; rather childhood is considered an important period of being – a time when children make sense of their world through active interaction with it (Corsaro, 1997). And they are not snowballing children; adults interacting with these children are co-learners who negotiate, challenge and guide while sharing power with them (Woodrow, 1999).

Curriculum for the agentic child is co-constructed through adult-child collaboration. Adults guide the learning process, based on their own learning, life experiences and resources, and both children and adults strive to augment their understandings of issues important to them (Woodrow, 1999). Planning based on observation, recording of children's language, ideas and interests, and discussion with children is indicative of a child's agency. Assessment based on portfolios containing work chosen by student and teacher, interviews with children about their learning, and peer review also promote agency in children.

Early childhood educators are very important in the lives and education of young children. Through critically examining situations, power relationships and discourses in operation, they can transform the situation (Yelland & Kilderry, 2005). Viewing children as agentic rather than needy and incompetent may be the first step in this transformation. A number of policies and practices relating to young children are currently being reviewed and rewritten, seemingly using the construct of the agentic child. These include: Early Childhood Australia's Code of Ethics (Early Childhood Australia, 2005), the new Queensland Early Years Curriculum

(Queensland Study Authority, 2005) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children's Standards and Accreditation Performance Criteria (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2005).

Research or any other relationship between adults and children is with children rather than about them. Their voices are given serious consideration (Sorin, 2003). Cannella (2000) envisions a new field of childhood studies that celebrates diversity and values the multiple voices of children. She suggests denaturalising childhood and positioning children as equal partners in life and in educational decision-making.

Conclusion

This paper has presented ten constructions of childhood (Sorin & Galloway, 2005): the innocent child, the noble/saviour child, the evil child, the snowballing child, the out of control child, the miniature adult, the adult-in-training, the child as commodity, the child as victim and the agentic child. They move from the child as dependant on adults (the innocent child, the evil child, the adult-in-training and the child as commodity) to the child as responsible for the adult (the noble/saviour child). In the middle is the negotiated position of the agentic child, the child who is viewed as a capable actor and who shares power with the adult.

While these constructs define childhood, they also recognise the role of the adult, both in relationship to the child and also in the creation of the construct itself. Each construct is seen as discrete and with the possibility of acting in combination with other constructs (for example, the agentic child could turn to a snowballing child by virtue of the adult relinquishing power, or a child may be seen as evil by some adults but a victim by others). Perhaps there are more than ten constructs; this paper invites comment and critique as well as examples from practice.

By bringing to light the many ways that childhood is and can be conceptualised, this paper asks practitioners to critically examine their situation, including power relationships and dominant discourses (Yelland & Kilderry, 2005). Transition is an event not exclusive to young children.

While supporting young children through the sometimes difficult transitions that they experience in early childhood, educators need to make transitions of their own, in their thinking about children and childhood, and to reconstruct their practice accordingly.

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Correspondence about this paper should be addressed to:
Dr. Reesa Sorin
School of Education
James Cook University
PO Box 6811
Cairns, Queensland, 4870 Australia
Email: Reesa.Sorin@jcu.edu.au