
Adult Concepts of Childhood: did Plowden make a difference?

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ABSTRACT The author reviews the concepts of childhood which underpinned traditional methods of teaching and assesses the extent to which these concepts have changed since the Plowden Report and the advent of child-centred education.

Introduction

Historically, in the United Kingdom, childhood's place in society has evolved from being a state in which children served to enhance the income of their family, to a situation where they became inactive in the workplace and protected from that which had become an 'adult' world. This happened over a relatively short period of time (Kehily, 2004). In part this change was attributable to the development of schooling and education for children, who were to be returned to their 'true position' whilst becoming reformed characters. It was during this time in history that the state became involved in the parent/child relationship (Hendrick, 1997b, p. 45).

Schools and education have always involved more than the provision of knowledge and learning. Through schooling the process by which childhood has been socially constructed and conceived has occurred. An examination of the history of education enables us to understand the changing nature of the relationship between children and the world around them (Hendrick, 1997a).

At the beginning of the twentieth century traditional education aimed to inculcate morality in children and to provide them with a frame of mind which was appropriate to their place within society. Schools were well ordered and proficient when it came to appropriate conduct and sound moral values (Brancaccio, 2000).

Child-centred, or progressive, education arose from 'radical dissatisfaction' with this traditional view of education. Child-centred education does not view the child as a small or 'defective' adult. Rather it sees children as needing to be active, both physically and mentally, through their learning experiences (Darling, 1994, p. 2).

Adult Concepts of Childhood

Adults construct compelling concepts regarding childhood which have effects on how children are considered and treated. Two examples are the innocent and naturally good child portrayed by Emile in Rousseau's version of childhood and, in stark contrast, the evangelical view of childhood which considers children to be wilful and potentially evil – a view which encouraged parents to break their child's will in order to avoid damnation (Gabriel, 2004).

Models of adults' concepts of childhood have been put forward by Hendrick (2005). He describes one of these as a dualism, in which the child is seen as a victim or threat. It is possible to see the overlapping of these two views in both traditional and child-centred education (Hendrick, 2003). Hendrick (1997b) suggests that another adult concept regarding children is that of an investment. Other historical concepts of childhood are the Romantic, the evangelical and that of John Locke (1632-1704).

Traditional

Schools were initially considered to be establishments where students would be taught manners and morals. The adult conception was that discipline and order in schools promoted discipline and order within society. Such schools impressed upon children 'their subservient role in the age relationship'. Children were thought of as future adults, they were taught not only their place as children, but their appropriate place as future adults (Hendrick, 1997a, p. 73). This suggests that children were seen as investments by the adults within their environment. Through their education and reformation they could become industrious adults working as domestic servants, factory employees and so forth.

At the end of the nineteenth century the classroom was a place where children learned by rote, were 'seen and not heard' and where there was liberal use of punishment for insubordinate children. Rose (1991) comments that the teaching style in schools was certainly authoritarian, and the method by which children learned was memorisation undertaken in a regimented manner. He suggests that these methods were influenced by codes and examinations, class size, adults' concepts regarding the status of children and the notion that education should be preparing children for their adult lives. These observations reinforce the concept that children were victims, whilst being seen as investments.

The classroom was organised in such a manner that it was possible to educate the 'greatest number at the minimal cost' (Brancaccio, 2000, p. 169). Children sat in allocated seats placed in rows all facing the teacher. This enabled uninterrupted visibility of the whole class for the teacher, allowing maximum observation. Pupils were given information simultaneously; rhythm and synchronisation in classroom activities promoted a quiet and attentive environment. It was through such organisation that a teacher was able to maintain authority and the effectiveness of the teacher was judged by how well the pupils conformed (Brancaccio, 2000). The need for such an ordered

environment suggests that children were seen as posing a threat to those providing their education. Through a stringent and consistently ordered setting the adult concept was that the position of the adult remained both effective and safe. As noted by Rose (1991) respect and obedience were not only expected but endorsed by corporal punishment.

Traditional education with its organisation, synchronisation and system of punishment was approved of by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who urged parents to break the will of children who, whatever the pain involved, needed saving from damnation (Darling, 1994). The adult conception of children was that they were a threat to society and without discipline and schooling would become delinquent. The method by which schooling was provided was a reflection of the Puritan view that a child was born innately sinful. Gittens (2004, p. 32) comments that such sinfulness was to be eliminated through training in both moral and religious subjects. Play was conceived as a 'dangerous' pastime; children were to be taught good behaviour and morality.

Progressive

The first official endorsement of 'progressive' educational methods can be seen in the Hadow Report of 1931, which looked in depth at how education was structured. Its main recommendations were that primary education should end at 11 and that different styles of secondary education should be made available. An 11 plus examination would enable a decision to be made as to the most suitable type of secondary education for each child (Hendrick, 1997a).

Hadow thus illustrated the adult concept of considering children as individuals, showing an element of progressive, child-centred education, being aware of individual children and their differences. However, the 11 plus proved to make victims of children, with its capacity to change a child's life. Sutherland (1984, in Hendrick, 1997a, p. 70) comments that a good performance 'might alter, even determine the course of a child's life'.

Child-centred progressive education has its roots in the beliefs and work of prominent philosophers such as Rousseau and Dewey and evolved from a general discontent with traditional methods of teaching and learning. Progressive education promotes the development of children whilst viewing them as individual learners. Children are conceived as innocents, reflecting Rousseau's notion that 'Nature provides for the child's growth in her own fashion, and this should never be thwarted' (1762, in Fisher, 2002, p. 39).

Rousseau considered that the problem was deformed adults and their questionable views regarding the best way to raise children, not the young and impressionable child. This is a direct contrast with the views of evangelicals and Locke, who saw the child to be in need of education, self-control and shame in order to become a civilised functional adult. A defining characteristic of adulthood was thought to be that of keeping control and overcoming one's own nature. Through this adult notion there came about one of the central

themes of education. Nature had to be prevailed over in order that an adequate education and a pure soul could be realised (Postman, 1982).

Dewey's philosophy regarding children's spontaneous needs was that they should be approached with a view to what the child is, rather than what he/she might be (Postman, 1982). He considered education to be a route via which development was made. Dewey, like Rousseau, considered the environment to be a valuable resource for children to gain understanding about the lives of their parents and the world of work. He believed that children's participation gave them a moral education, through their being a part of the community (Darling, 1994). These concepts are echoed in the Plowden Report (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967), which urged schools to work with parents as partners whilst assuming a larger role within the surrounding community.

A criticism of the progressive method was that the opportunities for children to make choices and have charge of their actions weakened the standing of the schoolteacher, who might interfere with the natural progression and development of the children in their charge. This belief was given further credence by the theories of Jean Piaget. His conviction was that children progress through specific stages at certain times in a sequential order, regardless of support from an adult. At best such support would actually be viewed as interference (Fisher, 2002). This notion would seem to support the adult concept of children as a threat to the position of the teacher.

Darling (1994) lists a number of differences between a contemporary primary school classroom and a classroom from the 1950s. These include the sounds of children participating in activities or discussions, tables arranged to facilitate conversation and interaction, and teachers valuing such pupil interaction, seeing it as promoting the skill of 'working together' amongst the pupils. Teachers are more approachable than they used to be, children are able to request help and use their own initiative in decision making without fearing the consequences, a central concern of progressive education.

Darling uses the expression 'educational investment'. Adults' concepts highlighted through the reformation of the primary curriculum and the introduction of Standard Attainment Tests (SATs) indicate that educationally children are an investment in human capital (Hendrick, 2003). The White Paper *Excellence in Schools*, published by the Department for Education and Employment (1997), states that investment in learning is equal to the investment made in machines and technical advances that proved to be pivotal to the Industrial Revolution. It comments that 'children are our future as a civilised society and a prosperous nation' (1997, in Hendrick, 2003, p. 220).

Further to this, Hendrick (2003) comments that specific educational objectives, described as developments, are provided with the intent of regulating and observing educational practice. Today education is controlled through structures such as the National Curriculum, SATs and school league tables, which inform parents' choices regarding where they send their children to be educated and give the government a clear idea of which schools are achieving and effective and which are not. There is thus a parallel between the

government and parents of today and the historical evangelical view that children need to be steered safely into adulthood.

By contrast, the Plowden Report states that 'At the heart of the educational process lies the child. No advances in policy, no acquisitions of new equipment have their desired effect unless they are in harmony with the nature of the child, unless they are fundamentally acceptable to him' (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967, para. 9).

This illustrates adults' conceptions regarding education at the time of the Plowden Report. Traditional methods of educating children were being recognised as unproductive and in many instances brutal. Children were seen to be victims in a society where adults viewed corporal punishment within educational establishments as moral and justified. With the evolution of progressive education came a gradual lessening of such punishment (Hendrick, 1997a). The change from traditional to progressive education marked a change in adults' concepts regarding the nature of children. From seeing them as delinquent characters who needed saving and a threat to a civilised society, children came to be viewed as innocents who could become educated through their experiences and then be seen as investments for the future of the nation.

Locke's concept of childhood – that a child's mind is a *tabula rasa* (a blank slate) – can be seen in the view that the child's place within the educational process is at the heart of it. Locke viewed the child as a precious resource and had enlightened thoughts regarding a child's physical growth: children need able bodies to enable them to develop able minds. Adults' responsibilities to children are great in that what is imprinted on the child's mind reflects how well adults (parents, teachers and eventually government) are discharging this responsibility (Postman, 1982).

During the 1960s Piaget's theories and influence were at their height. They were widely known and accepted. Piagetian theory forms the psychological grounding for much of the Plowden Report (Gillard, 1987). This can be seen in the arguments that children learn best through their own discovery, that teachers should facilitate constructive learning through everyday practice, and that play is an important activity within nurseries and infant schools (Halsey & Sylva, 1987).

Plowden saw play as a natural and effective educational method which aids a child's active learning. It facilitates an atmosphere which is conducive to meeting a child's needs developmentally. The report suggested that adults who questioned teachers when they allowed children to play were ignorant of the fact that play is the first and foremost way in which children learn during early childhood (Heaslip, 1994). This highlights the Romantic concept that children learn naturally through their own play and experiences and is in complete contrast to the evangelical view that children need the continual supervision of their parents and that play is a dangerous and frivolous pastime (Gittins, 2004).

Backlash

During 1976 the Prime Minister, James Callaghan, gave a speech which initiated debates regarding teaching methods and educational outcomes. He commented that there were criticisms from within industry that children leaving schools were not equipped to undertake the tasks required and argued that parents were perturbed about the new progressive methods being used to educate their children. He told teachers that their job was to meet the needs of parents and industry – as well as the needs of children. He further suggested that higher standards were required in the world, and so more was required from schools than ever before (Woodward, 2001).

Once again, children were being seen as future investments for the nation: the needs of parents and industry were placed before those of the child. These concepts are very similar to those that were in evidence at the outset of compulsory education, when children were taken out of industry where, as wage earners, they had supplemented the family income and were indeed investments in the industrial arena (Hendrick, 1997b).

Following Callaghan's speech, the Plowden Report was much criticised. Such criticisms began prior to this, in 1969, with *Perspectives on Plowden* by R.S. Peters, who came up with two contrasting notions on the same page. The first was that child-centred education was inappropriate for the needs of the time, the second that, should the recommendations of the report be implemented, there would be a marked improvement in primary education. During the same year the 'Black Papers' began to be published. These were political and enthusiastically critical of the Plowden Report. They argued that the discovery method of learning would promote a 'magpie curriculum'. Rousseau's concept of the opposition between book learning and learning through experience was dismissed with the comment that a lot can be discovered in books. One newspaper columnist commented: 'we are told that progressive teachers do not aim at academic results so much as at "social and moral growth", much less measurable commodities. One cannot help suspecting, however, that a study of the relationship between vandalism and teacher-bashing and informal methods might lead many parents to opt for the 3Rs' (*Daily Telegraph*, cited in Darling, 1994, p. 103).

It seemed that everyone had something to say concerning the Plowden Report and child-centred education. From politicians to members of the public, all were given a voice. The absent voice was that of the child. This is reminiscent of the evangelists whose concept was to give direction to their children and to arm them with reading, which was considered to be a key weapon against lack of knowledge, irreverence and laziness (Postman, 1982).

Darling (1994) suggests that child-centred progressive teaching fell out of favour in the early 1990s. The report of the 'Three Wise Men' (Alexander et al, 1992) was widely perceived as supporting a move away from such teaching. In fact, it argued for a balance of approaches (specifically a mix of topic and subject-based teaching). And while it suggested that whole-class teaching might provide 'order, control, purpose and concentration' (Darling, 1994, p. 108), it

noted that the evidence for this was not clear-cut, that there were limitations to whole-class teaching which ought to be acknowledged, and that what was needed was a judicious mix of whole-class, group and individual work.

Continuing Debate

Adult concepts of child-centred progressive education came about through the philosophies of, amongst others, Rousseau and Dewey, who believed in respect for childhood and diversity and considered that education should reflect the nature of the child. Their concept was that schools should adapt to the child's needs and that as creative beings children should learn through their experiences (Darling, 1994). Children were to be seen as individuals in the present rather than adults of the future, investments for tomorrow.

In traditional education, adults' concepts were different: they saw children as investments, innocents and victims in the workplace who needed saving through education (Hendrick, 1997b). The methods used to educate children traditionally were methodical and in some instances brutal: children were viewed as victims but they were victimised due to the adult concept that children threatened the position of the adults in charge of them (Brancaccio, 2000).

Although there are thus many different adult concepts of childhood – the child as innocent, victim, threat, investment – rarely are the voices or the opinions of the children heard. Woodhead (1997, p. 78) observed that childhood is considered to be an age of dependency characterised by 'protectionist' adult-child relationships in which the adult is the provider and the child takes the role of 'passive consumer'.

The concept of childhood arose from the evolution of education and schools whose aim was to turn youngsters into literate adults. Thus children came to be viewed as unformed adults. It has been said that centuries of children attended school in the expectation that it would make them good (Postman, 1982). Postman suggests that children did not enjoy the experience – or indeed that the idea of children enjoying schooling was not even considered. That idea had to wait for child-centred methods.

Darling (1994, p. vi) quotes Aristotle's *Politics*, written in the fourth century: 'In modern times there are opposing views about the practice of education'. Darling argues that in a developing society changes in education are inevitable as are deliberations as to the effectiveness and need for such changes. The government now has a larger part to play in the reformation of educational policies.

Have adults' concepts of childhood changed since the publication of the Plowden Report? Sylva (Halsey & 1987, p. 11) suggests that whilst the Plowden Report may have flaws, was a little ill-advised and not explicit enough in some areas, it brought education back to the 'humanistic tradition'. It gave the message that education is about cultivating morals, values and creativity in children, as opposed to nurturing tomorrow's workforce. Sylva also comments

that whilst the report was never fully implemented and has been misunderstood, it still exudes inspiration and shapes goals in new teachers.

The fact that the Plowden Report is still being discussed so long after it was published demonstrates that it has undoubtedly had an effect on adult concepts of childhood. It reintroduced the notion that children are individuals who are able to learn through their own creativity and experiences (Darling, 1994). Through the reliance on the psychological theories of the day it was able to reinforce the importance of research in the area of childhood and education (Sylva, 1987).

Unfortunately, current government thinking does not see education as something provided for and on the behalf of children, but as the means by which children can be prepared for employment and status in society (Hendrick, 2003). Thus the adult concept of children as future adults and investments in society is still held. The child can still be seen as victim.

Prout (2005, p. 472) argues that to be a child today does not mean being fashioned by adult-controlled establishments. Through 'individualisation' he suggests they will become less passive, and indeed come to be seen as active interpreters and co-constructors in their own lives and in their surrounding environments. Such an adult conception echoes the child-centred education promoted by Plowden.

Conclusions

In traditional methods of education children were seen as victims, as future adults and as an investment for the nation. They were considered to be innocents who needed saving from the labour they had endured and placing in schools where they would gain morals and values (Hendrick, 1997b). They were viewed as a threat in the classroom, where a teacher's effectiveness was judged by the control he or she exercised (Brancaccio, 2000).

In contrast, child-centred progressive education treated children as individuals in the present, to be respected and encouraged to be creative and to learn through their own activity and experiences (Darling, 1994). In Rousseau's Romantic philosophy children were seen as young and impressionable, whilst deformed adults were conceived to be the problem (Postman, 1982).

Rousseau's influence can be clearly seen in the Plowden Report, which promoted the notion of children learning through discovery, allowing them to make sense of their own experiences. Similarly, Dewey's vision of a classroom where children could work in groups interacting with each other influenced Plowden, while Piaget's theories provided the psychological backdrop for the report (Darling, 1994).

Childhood is a conception which has evolved alongside schooling. Hendrick (1997a) suggests that the identity of children changed when compulsory schooling began, from that of wage earner to pupil. He argues that education's original intent was to return children to their true position.

However, whilst children may no longer need to work to supplement their parents' wages, in today's society children are still viewed as the nation's investment. This can be clearly seen in recent developments in education, including SATs and the National Curriculum. Hendrick (2003) sees these as a way of investing in children educationally. The children are seen as human capital.

Prout's view (2005) is that children will become less passive and participate more. This notion has been promoted through the ideas and philosophies of the progressive education which Plowden advocated: for example, that education should reflect the nature of those who are to be in receipt of it, that it is of great importance to study children and their development, and that children should be respected as individuals (Darling, 1994).

As Darling comments, there will always be debates regarding education and its delivery. Despite the fact that it was never fully implemented and that it has often been misquoted, 40 years on the Plowden Report still has the power to initiate such debates and to inspire.

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