

Symposium: What is a Child?

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Rationale

A theory of education begs a theory of childhood, yet childhood is often taken for granted in educational debate, despite a wealth of literature problematising it historically, sociologically, psychologically, and, all too rarely, philosophically. The proposed symposium draws on analytic and Continental philosophy, the history of ideas about childhood and social theory to explore the educationally fundamental question, 'What is a child?'

Outlines of contributions

Stables:

'Child' usually entails three distinct ideas. *Child 1* is the child of parents and ancestors, and is not age-related: we are all *Child 1*. *Child 2* is the vulnerable little one, demanding and deserving of adult care and 'special' in certain ways. Particularly after Rousseau and Romanticism, this might be considered the dominant sense of child in contemporary Western societies yet, as Aries most famously pointed out, it was not always so. *Child 3* is the child as novice (with the adult as expert); this was arguably Plato's dominant sense of the child. Societies give differential emphases to these across time and place. However, all three ideas rest on a settled conception of the adult as rational citizen with a fixed social role. The recent problematisation of adulthood begs a reconsideration of childhood for which previous resources may prove inadequate.

Cassidy:

We seem to be inextricably attached to the notion of the child as a Rousseauian ideal: child as innocent, child as naïve, child as becoming. Jenks (1996) suggests that we address this notion of difference – difference to adult beings – by reflecting on what he calls the "savage" child, the "natural" child and the "social" child. Each perspective categorises child but maintains that notion of child as something other. Postman (1994) posits that the child in the Middle Ages existed in the same social and intellectual world as adults, that difference existed in terms of class rather than age; that it was the advent of print that created the child/adult distinction. He alerts us to the fact that television has blurred the distinction between child and adult, and in the fifteen years since he highlighted this feature, the growth and accessibility of the internet has likely further aided the return to some kind of mediaeval society in certain aspects of the child/adult divide.

Stables (2008) asserts that "...how we think about [children] does affect how we deal with them" (p.1). This thinking about children is important and we seem to be making strides in thinking about them in the sense of how we "deal with them".

Cassidy (2007) holds that children are always likely to be treated as a means to an end, as becomings and that behaving towards children, and engaging with them, as *beings* is a problem. The most recent United Nations' report card on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was published in 2008 – and the UK has not performed well (Committee on the Rights of

the Child, 2008). The report suggests that we are still failing our children in many aspects of their lives. Might this failure be because we are spending a lot of time *thinking* about children rather than “dealing with them” in any positive sense? Reynaert, Bouverne-de-Bie and Vandeveld (2009) pose that we must shift our focus to “examining the contexts in which the UNCRC is applied” (p.529). Here, I would like to consider the recommendations from the report card and place these against the question of how we deal with children and whether a report that is more positive than ‘must do better’ is likely to take us beyond seeing the child as different, as other, as becoming.

Peim:

'The child that therefore I am'

What does it mean when childhood is variously separated out - as in myriad contemporary juridical and symbolic practices - as a distinct state of being? And what resources for thinking are available for looking again at this apparent state of affairs? I would like to consider some of the proliferation of concerns with the child, children and childhood in different departments of existence beginning with a Derridean problematization of the human-animal binary. I would then like to consider the anthropological significance of the burgeoning of discourses concerning the child, children and childhood in modernity in relation to some strangely other contexts ...

Storme:

“What is the child?” These mere four words and their question mark unravel a web of mysteries, a world of profound paradoxes and pivotal positions in which the philosopher of education must be truly an eight-legged creature in order not to get lost in the depths of this question. Even though “the child” is considered a trivial truth in our everyday language and most of our theorizing, the closer we study it, the more it poses itself as a problem. This problem of the child has three dimensions that are closely linked, but refer to different sets of questions. The first dimension ‘the secret of the child’ is about the near absence of the child in today’s educational rhetoric and its neutralization of an experience of childhood. Secondly, ‘the intangibility of the child’ is about the plethora of uses of the concept of the child, and dealing with the wealth and paradoxes of the concept, thirdly ‘the crisis of the child’ is about the voices that claim a crisis, disappearance, sexualization,..., of childhood, in short, what is happening to childhood today. The author will weave these three threads in order to contribute a perspective on this problem.