

Perceptions of Childhood EMOW03
Do Children have a Privileged Place in Society?

To be privileged suggests that children have an advantage within a society and are favoured over others. In addition, it suggests that children live full, healthy and happy lives, that they enjoy emotional stability and varied and enjoyable learning experiences. This essay will focus on whether young children in England have a privileged place in society in the twenty first century. Since the year '2000' there have been a number of significant changes in government policy in the way young children are viewed, educated and their welfare protected, particularly in the early years phase of childhood. This essay will explore how these changes have affected the child's status within society and their quality of life by exploring how the child's needs, rights and social context are addressed. Finally conclusions will be drawn to whether government policy ensures that all young children have a privileged place in England.

In England there has been a rapid development of legislation, policy and initiatives to ensure that young children receive the best possible care and services and ensure a privileged place within this society. Indeed, even the Queen's Speech 2005 prioritised our youngest citizens with no less than four points addressing the welfare of children, education and family support. (The Guardian 2005) [online]

The development of policy regarding children is informed by current social constructions of childhood. Towards the end of the last century, Rousseau's romantic view of childhood dominated legislation and policy that put child concern and the protection of children at the forefront of social agenda. The

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view that young children are vulnerable, innocent and need protection by way of rights and legislation was, and still is high on the list of government priorities and reflects concern at a national level stemming from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989. Maynard and Thomas (2004, p88) agree with this suggesting that,

“Children’s rights have become an increasingly important part of social and political discourse.”

‘1997’ was a significant year as for the first time the government recognised a responsibility towards its’ youngest children and announced a National Childcare Strategy. The largest component of this was Sure Start, the first government programme to target the birth to three age group. The Sure Start initiative is an area based programme and focuses in the most disadvantaged areas, offering some families support in the crucial years of children’s lives. Sure Start have evolved over the past few years and now their centres provide early education integrated with health and family support services, and childcare from 8am till 6pm. Jackson (2004) suggests that this is aimed at helping families, particularly single parents to return to work instead of relying on welfare payments. Evaluation of Sure Start centres has shown,

“small but significant improvements in outcomes for children – for instance, an improved language development in two year olds and reduction in parental anxiety.” (Harris et al cited in Maynard and

Thomas 2004 p.93)

According to Every Child Matters (2005) [online] the children’s centre network is being expanded indicating that,

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“there will be 2,500 centres across the county by 2008.”

Initiatives such as Sure Start recognises that there are inequalities in children's lives in England, one of which is class, children who are born poor are disadvantaged in many ways from the more affluent classes.

Furthermore, Gittins (1998) would suggest that life chances are also largely determined by the colour of your skin. Thus childhood cannot be explored as a blanket term. Frones cited in James and Prout (1997 p.xiii) for example argued that,

“There is not one childhood, but many, formed at the intersection of different cultural, social and economic systems, natural and man-made physical environments. Different positions in society produce different experiences.”

Penn (2005,p.109) supports this argument when stating,

“Poverty and injustice cut across culture and make life very difficult for young children wherever they are growing up.” (p109)

Even though the government in England is attempting to address these inequalities and provide support services to improve the lives of all young children, initiatives such as Sure Start are simply not enough to ensure this.

“The main criticism is that it reaches only a third of children in poverty and that services are still fragmented rather than joined up.” (Jackson 2004, p.93)

Stainton Rogers (2004 ,p.127) would suggest that there are three main discourses currently informing policy regarding children in the west. These include “needs”, “rights” and “quality of life”. Every Child Matters (2003) and

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more recently The Childcare Bill (2006) reflects a fairly new discourse, quality of life, which differentiates from needs and rights in terms of specifically acknowledging a contextual framework. Boyden (1997 p.200) agrees that there has been a shift towards his discourse and states,

“Nowadays the means by which childhood is regulated are becoming ever more sophisticated, stretching far beyond simple population issues and giving priority to the quality of life.”

Stainton Rodgers (2004 ,p.137) suggests that quality of life,

“has to take into account the concerns, values, resources and limitations of the families and communities in which children are reared and cared for.”

Thus, the most recent legislation and policy acknowledge such differences, address the ‘whole child’ and aims to eradicate inequities within the lives of young children, providing protection of welfare and support through integrated services aimed at the family unit as a whole. Every Child Matters (2001) takes an holistic view of children and focuses on five specific aims. A healthy child, a safe child, children who enjoy and achieve, children who make a positive contribution to society and children who achieve economic well-being. Every Child Matters and the legislation that enforces it, The Children’s Act 2004, will inevitably increase the protection young children receive through an holistic approach and help to ensure all the child’s needs are being met. The Childcare Bill 2006 aims to integrate services further, offer extended childcare facilities for children who have working parents and provide easily accessible information for children and their families. The Bill indicates that

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Local Education Authorities will be given these statutory duties to carry out and pledges funding for the development of these services. 4Children, the national children's charity welcomes the new 'Childcare Bill' but has concerns for vulnerable families when suggesting,

"By focusing on working parents, the Bill is in danger of doing little to support our most disadvantaged children. The new duty does not require Local Authorities to provide childcare where it is not sustainable on its own, which is likely to be in poorer areas."

(4Children 2006) [online]

This indicates that government policy is headed in the right direction to ensure that all young children experience a good quality of life. Specific groups of children however are once again being excluded. It is clear to see that this initiative is directed towards encouraging parents to return to the workforce, thus promoting economic well-being. Joslyn, Such and Bond (2005, p186) indicate that,

"The rationale behind 'less eligibility' – that those in work should always be better off than those on state benefits – has remained an important factor in the fashioning of twenty-first century policy."

Moss and Penn (1996) and Tolfree and Woodhead (1999) all envisage a "children's culture" developing within our society and argue that young children should be recognised as equals and have rights to their share of resources, without having to rely on their parents to provide for them. The opinions and views of children should be listened to across all aspects of their

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lives, even children under the age of six. Children's participation in the development of services is endorsed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; in addition The Children's Act 1989 represents a number of principles that demonstrates respect for the views of children, however, over the last decade the child's involvement has been limited. Nevertheless, the importance of considering children's views has gained momentum in recent years. Studies have been commissioned and undertaken within the early years to consult with children about the services they receive such as 'Listening to Young Children: the mosaic approach' (Clark and Moss 2001) and 'Children's views on Childcare Quality' (Mooney and Blackburn 2003). In addition many early years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCPs) have undertaken formal consultation with children as part of their childcare audit.

"According to the 2000/1 survey of 95 EYDCPs, 84 percent had consulted with children." (DfEE 2001 p.3)

Further more Surestart's 'Here by Right' website offers standards to enable private and voluntary organisations to map and improve the way forward to enable the active participation of young children in decision -making. This all points to children within the early years playing a more active role in the care and education they receive. Being involved in making decisions that effect ones life is a right that has been enjoyed by adults in England for many years. This is a basic human right, therefore giving children this right cannot be seen as privileged, quite the opposite, it demonstrates an oppressive society who for many years has controlled and dominated young c hildren, and only now is

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beginning to value the child as a person in their own right. According to Franklin (2002, p.21),

“children are often denied rights which adults take for granted mainly the right to make decisions about matters that concern them from public policy to the private sphere of the home and family life.”

Some (Burr and Montgomery 2003) would argue that the controversy that surrounds these rights are centred on issues of children’s competence.

However, as Alderson (2002, pp158 – 159) observes:

“It is not a question as to whether or not two year olds can understand, because they are interpreting and making sense of their experiences all the time. The question is how skilled and respectful are the adults in listening to the child and ensuring that clear and relevant information is exchanged with them.”

Suggesting that children should be empowered, and by listening to young children needs will be met and rights will be satisfied.

Moss and Penn (1996,p.95) argued for a complete rethink in the provision of education within the early years in order to improve the quality of experiences, care and education young children receive.

“There would be more emphasis on the quality of life in the here and now, conviviality, pleasurable and creative activities, fun and exercise, painting, puppetry, dance and drama, singing and music, cooking and eating, digging and building – in short what Robert Owen called Merriment.”

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Jackson (2004, p97) suggests that Gunilla Hallden looked at two views of how we see children, in terms of “the child as a project” and “the child as a being”. The child as a project views children by way of what they might become, someone who is moulded and instructed by society, whereas the child as a being is valued as an individual with their own driving force to develop needing adults as “*supporters not instructors*”. From the above extract Moss and Penn (1996) envisaged an education system that reflected a ‘children’s culture’ in which the child is seen as a being in their own right. The development of a national framework for children aged 3 to 6 years in the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (2000) goes along way to addressing some of the recommendations made by Moss and Penn. However, the education system in England including frameworks for children under six focus on the ‘tabula rasa’ perception of childhood which values children for the school child, adolescent or adult they will become instead of children who are valued and respected for what they are. Or as Gunilla Hallden would suggest, ‘the child as a project’. This can be seen quite clearly in the foreword to the Guidance for the Foundation Stage.

“The Foundation Stage is about developing key learning skills such as listening, speaking, concentration, persistence and learning to work together and cooperate with other children. It is also about developing early communication, literacy and numeracy skills that will prepare young children for key stage one of the national curriculum .”

(Hodge 2000 p.1)

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It would be wrong however to suggest that all practitioners working with young children share the view of Minister Hodge. In many early years settings children are valued for who they are and build their practices on supporting and guiding young children through this significant stage in their development, building on social constructivist theorists such as Vygotsky and Bruner. In addition the Foundation Stage has helped to raise the standards of care and education young children receive across a variety of settings within the early years by focusing on the well established theory that,

“young children learn best through well planned play opportunities”.

(DfES 2000 p. 4)

Thus ensuring varied and enjoyable learning experiences.

In conclusion, it appears that within the last few years politicians have placed a greater emphasis on investment in children which reflects a growing public awareness of and interest in the culture of childhood and the concept of seeing children as individuals in their own right rather than miniature adults. The government appear to be focusing on giving young children the best possible start in life, a life where health, protection from harm and education have key roles to play in guaranteeing children a privileged place in society. By listening to what children say about the services they receive shows that society has begun to value the child's opinion, however this is a long way off the rights adults have and suggests that the child is still regarded as someone who is controlled and dominated by others. Thus, this essay has emphasised the need for the child to become a co-constructor not merely in their own

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learning but also in their identity if they are to be truly privileged. Vast improvements have been made in the education and care of young children receive, by considering the whole child, their needs, rights, and quality of life with the family context, not just their intellectual needs. However Moss and Penn (1996) would suggest that for the 'children's culture' they envisage to give children a privileged place within our society further development of integrated services are still needed, without limitations, not focusing on some groups but all children regardless of economic background and culture. Only by allowing all children and families access to these services will equality, advantage and a privileged place in society be enjoyed by all children in England.

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