

CONSTRUCTIONS OF CHILDHOOD AND THE CONCEPTS OF CHILDREN AS BEINGS AND BECOMINGS

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A central part of recent debates in the sociology of childhood has been the division between children as becomings and children as beings. Both positions have been well argued and have had significant impact on everyday teachers' practice, but still they present diametrically opposite attitudes towards the concept of a child and his/her development. In former view, children are seen as subjects largely without subjectivity and individuality, as a 'set of potentials' or a 'project in making' which are to develop into adults (beings) or, in other words, that children are in the state of 'not yet being'. The new perspectives on the concept of children regard children as beings. In this view children are seen as active human beings, who take part in everyday life which is more than just preparation for the future. A child is seen as a social actor and should be understood in its own right and not by assumed shortfall of competence, reason or significance. There is a growing need for a model that can bring these different positions together and make them integrated, interdependent and necessary components of the same field instead of being competitive, in order to better understand the concept of a child and to increase his/her agency in the contemporary world. This paper will examine different constructions of childhood as well as concepts of children as beings and children as becomings and argue for the importance of connecting these two concepts, so that they should not be considered as opposed but rather integrated and complementary. Although they are well-supported, neither being nor becoming discourse on their own provide adequate viewpoint for understanding of children and childhood in the society they live in. Both aspects are interrelated in children's lives. Furthermore, both views on children and childhood have shortcomings which could be overcome by complementing one with the other.

Keywords: childhood, children, beings, becomings

There has been a growing diversity of interests and agenda that have been pursued in the field of childhood studies, which has led the field to the crossroads in its development. A central part of recent debates in the sociology of childhood has been the division between children as *becomings* and children as *beings*. Both positions have been well argued and have had significant impact on everyday teachers' practice, but still they present diametrically opposite attitudes towards the concept of a child and his/her development. Thus, there is a growing need for a model that can bring these different positions together and make them integrated, interdependent and necessary components of the same field instead of being competitive, in order to better understand the concept of a child and to increase his/her agency in the contemporary world. This paper will examine different constructions of childhood as well as concepts of children as *beings* and children as *becomings* and argue for the importance of connecting these two concepts, so that they should not be considered as opposed but rather integrated and complementary.

Constructions of childhood

Childhood has been seen and defined in different ways throughout history. At one point it was seen as primarily biological, natural phenomenon (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998:17). In this view childhood is seen as a universal, standardized and inevitable process of development, which consequently gave rise to objections and criticism. This led to the development of new views which regard childhood as socially constructed, based on the social understanding and interpretation of what it represents. This was first noted by *Aries* (1965) who stated that "in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist" (p. 128) in the sense that children did not have any special status and they participated in the society according to their abilities, just as adults (Qvortrup, 2005). This notion led researchers to perceive childhood as diverse and socially influenced phenomenon instead of only focusing on its universal nature. The idea of childhood is thus seen as a cultural perception of the early part of life, which can be changed and influenced by historical and political aspects. However, this does not mean that childhood is completely arbitrary in nature. As Qvortrup (1994) argues, childhood has both constant and universal features, but changes of policies, discourses and social practices which define childhood also change its character over time. Furthermore, as James and James (2004) explain.

In other words, it is recognized that the notion of childhood has certain universal characteristics as a developmental stage of life, but it is also recognized that the interpretations of this stage are different with regard to different cultures and historical periods. This position was further affirmed *Woodhead* (1996). Consequently, ECEC institutions and practitioners should always have in mind that their beliefs about what is best for children are predominantly cultural constructions. This can be illustrated with an example I encountered while comparing ECEC services in Serbia and Norway. While in Serbia there is a strong belief that it is not healthy to take children outside when it is raining and very cold, that it is not acceptable and would even be considered as malpractice, in Norway this is an everyday practice which is considered to be healthy and in the best interest of the children. Furthermore, it is not only that these views on children and childhood shape attitudes and activities of the ECEC institutions and practitioners (and the society as a whole), but also they shape how children perceive the world around them. This shows that children's everyday

experiences are greatly influenced by societal beliefs and attitudes about what the childhood and children are and, furthermore, by adults' behavior towards them, which consequently shapes how they engage with and participate in the adult world.

Children as *becomings* and *beings*

Therefore, the understanding of what childhood and children are is to a great extent socially constructed. In this part of the paper, I will focus on the perception of a child as a *becoming* and as a *being*, examine what those notions mean and explore the division between them. As stated above, this division has been a topic of interest of many debates in the sociology of childhood, and furthermore, both positions have been well asserted and have influenced everyday practice and attitudes towards children to a great extent. Nevertheless, they still present opposed views towards the concepts of a child and his/her development. In the following paragraphs we will explore these two concepts in the light of relevant literature.

Children as *becomings*

The dominant discourse of developmental psychology, sociology and anthropology has viewed children as *becomings* for the last several decades. For the developmental psychology the individual child was only of interest in what that child revealed about children's thinking in general (James, 2009:35-36). As *Burman* (1994) explains children were subjects who were "irrevocably isolated and positioned outside history and society" (p. 154) and a subjects largely without subjectivity and individuality (James, 2009, p. 36). This means that children are seen as a 'set of potentials' or a 'project in making' (Woodhead, 2009:54) which are to develop into adults (beings) or in other words that children are in the state of 'not yet being' (Verhellen, 1997, as cited in Woodhead, 2009:54). The anthropology was also focused on children primarily as *becomings*, rather than *beings*, even though it challenged the idea of the universalism. The future that children represent is a key focus for this discipline as well and it studied children in order to get to know more about processes of cultural reproduction, rather than to understand their present lives (James, 2009). Sociology took similar position, focusing on the process of socialization, a process through which children become members of the society and acquire the norms of the society they live in. The position of children within the process of socialization was best summarized by *Lee* (2001).

To define children as *becomings* means to focus on the progressive aspect of childhood, on what those children will become as adults instead of focusing on their current experiences of being a child. Thus, children are seen as "*changeable and still incomplete individuals*" (Lee, 2001:5) who are yet to acquire all the universal skills and features which they are currently lacking. Therefore, it is future oriented, deals with how they become, how they acquire those skills, and how they transition from childhood into adulthood. This idea of a child as progressing towards completeness "*renders the child regressively incomplete the smaller s/he is*" (Qvortrup, 2005:4-5). Furthermore, the emphasis is put on the 'changing' (i.e. unstable) state of the child progressing towards the stable status of adult (James & James, 2004:27). The importance of present actions is seen through the future outcomes they will produce. This view is supported by the fact that children do eventually grow up into adults, that they do change and acquire

new skills. It is also supported by the research which shows that healthy cognitive and emotional development in early years translates into tangible economic returns (Woodhead, 2009:55). Furthermore, children themselves often see themselves in terms of what they will become, which in a way shapes their everyday experiences and actions. However, since this discourse depicted the child as predominantly 'passive', which had little or no resemblance to the everyday lives and actions of children, it made this theorizing unsustainable by 1970s (James & James, 2004:27). This led to the emergence of new views on children (as *beings*) in the field of childhood studies.

Children as *beings*

The new perspectives on the concept of children which emerged recently regard children as *beings*, stating that "*new sociological approaches to the study of childhood is the move to study real children or the experiences of being a child*" (James et al., 1998:207). Thus, we can see that attitudes towards the concept of children changed, influenced by historical, societal and economic changes. The change has been from looking at children as *becomings* with development of developmental psychology, towards a new perspective that is looking at children as predominantly beings, with the development of social constructivist theory.

In this view children are seen as active human beings, who take part in everyday life which is more than just preparation for the future. Children are getting to know themselves, creating relationships with others and engaging with joys and complexities of life which is just as important as the adults they will become. This means that present experiences and actions of children are just as important as the future i.e. their status now as children bears the same importance as their future status as adults and thus requires the same respect. In other words, the child is viewed as active person. The idea that children are active social actors is further explained by Uprichard, who states that as social actors children are "*actively constructing their own childhood*" and that they have "*views and experiences about being a child*" (Uprichard, 2008:304). Furthermore, this view accentuates the present, thus leaving the future experiences out of its focus. This however leads to its criticism since an important aspect of childhood is overseen.

Importance of connecting these concepts

After we have examined these concepts we can see that "*the being and becoming division is a product of historical development*" and furthermore that "*as such, it is open to change*" (Lee, 2001:6). Therefore, instead of considering concepts of children as beings and children as becomings as opposed, I am arguing that they need to be regarded as integrated and complementary.

There have been ample relevant ideas, theories and research that support both of these positions. The *becoming* discourse is supported by the fact that children do eventually grow up into adults and in that process they do change and acquire new skills. Moreover, the research showed that healthy cognitive and emotional development in early years has concrete social and economic benefits in the future. Furthermore, children themselves often have a strong sense of becoming and they anticipate adulthood which in a way contributes in forming their childhoods in the present. On the other hand, the being discourse is supported by the research which shows that

children are social actors who have their own views and experiences about being a child and furthermore that they are actively constructing their childhoods. All of these ideas about children are verified by evidence, thus their relevance cannot be denied.

However, both of these positions have shortcomings as well, for which they have been criticized. Becoming discourse is mainly future oriented and neglects or dismisses the present everyday realities of being a child. Furthermore, it raises the issue of competence i.e. that children are incompetent while adults are not. Being discourse neglects future experiences of becoming adult, thus it doesn't give the opportunity to explore the ways in which it influences the present experiences of being children. As "*children's accounts of their own being almost invariably include a strong sense of becoming*" (Woodhead, 2009:54), their present experiences are influenced by their anticipation of adulthood (Qvortrup, 2004:269), an aspect ignored in the being discourse.

Therefore, there is a need to integrate both of these positions, to consider them as complementary instead of competitive, since "*children are always and necessarily being and becoming*" (Uprichard, 2008:303). Children are social actors in their own right, who have opinions, ideas about and influence on their everyday experiences, but they are growing up, changing and acquiring new skills, and moreover, they are aware of it and are looking forward to it, which consequently has an impact and influence on their everyday actions and experiences. Therefore, these two dimensions are interrelated and interdependent in everyday life of children. And since we cannot separate them in the everyday life of children thus we should not separate them in the theory as well.

Furthermore, looking from the time perspective all things are being and becoming at once. While the discourse of being child emphasizes the present, and that of the becoming child stresses the future, in everyday life both present and future interact together and the key to understanding the notion of the child is "*the interplay between the different notions of time within each discourse*" (Uprichard, 2008:308).

There have already been some works arguing that these concepts should not be considered as diametrically opposed but as integrated. As Uprichard (2008) suggests it is appropriate to consider these discourses together, and not necessarily as conflicting discourses, but as ones that complement one another. Furthermore, Lee (2001) suggests that children and adults are always in the process of being and becoming with one another, and that they are more or less competent at doing certain things throughout their lives. Therefore, considering these discourses together is said to be much more useful than considering them separately (Uprichard, 2008:307), and it decreases the differences between them.

If we take children rights perspective, we can see that both discourses are present, but that one is not given primacy over the other. On one side, there are implicit and explicit references to the becoming child, or in other words fulfilling children's rights has a consequence to become adults (Uprichard, 2008:306). Such references can be found in both *Article 5* of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which mentions the "*evolving capacities of the child*" and *Article 6* which urges State Parties to ensure to the maximum extent possible the (survival and) development of the child (UN, 1989). On the other side, children's rights treaties recognize the uniqueness of children, not merely "*as scale model adults*" (White, 2002:2) but as beings who have something to say which adults do not already know. Therefore, *Article 13* of CRC deals with the child's right to freedom of expression which includes freedom to seek, receive and impart information

and ideas of all kinds, [...] through any [other] media of the child's choice (UN, 1989) while *Article 12* deals with the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child (UN, 1989). The children, in this respect, given the opportunity to be seen as beings (Lee, 2001:93). We see that throughout the Convention the being and becoming aspect of the child are interrelated and that its aim is to recognize the need to protect the children as they are developing into adults but at the same way recognize their present nature not only as a step towards adulthood but in its uniqueness which should be expressed and respected in its own right.

Conclusion

To conclude, neither being nor becoming discourse on their own, although they are well-supported, provide adequate viewpoint for understanding of children and childhood in the society they live in. Also, both aspects are interrelated in lives of children. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that both views on children and childhood have shortcomings which could be overcome by complementing one with the other. This was recognized in some works which, drawing on children's rights perspective among others, advocate that these two aspects of children's everyday life could not be taken apart from each other. Therefore, these two views should be seen not as opposing, but as complementary, giving basis for a model which would combine and interrelate these two aspects in order to better understand the concept of a child in modern times and increase his/her agency in the world.

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