

## **Children, Families and States.**

*How are relations changing between States, families and children?  
Can the State ever be a parent?*

Report of May 2005 conference was held by the Institute of Education and the Open University.

### ***'To move the world, on a child's heart':***

#### ***The child figure in nineteenth century writing.'***

Dr Harry Hedrick (University of Southern Denmark) reviewed the culturally complex and contradictory understandings of the child figure in a vast 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century literature. Hidden and often unconscious concepts of the child, as metaphor and symbol, are central to historical struggles to form and to understand the family, the modern State, adulthood, and what it means to be a human.

Children are variously perceived as savages, slaves or national resources, as victims or threats, innocent or sinful, natural, mutable, unfinished and vulnerable to corruption. Child images range from the romantic child, the domestic ideal, the evangelical child, and the child in the age of revolutions, and they contributed to debates about how to balance individuality with social cohesion, innocence with experience, nature with society, and spirituality with industrialisation.

Images of the natural pre-social child enabled adults to explore their own vulnerability and potential violation, their concerns about sexuality and violence, and their ideals about the private family and home, while growing capitalism and secularism were compromising human relationships and childlike spontaneity and innocence. Today, professionals, politicians and academics use the child figure in adult-centred debates about economics, social policy, psychoanalysis and relations between the family and the state.

### ***'Mind that Child':***

#### ***The implications of extended schooling for children's human rights***

Terri Dowty (Action on Rights for Children) outlined the government's 5-year strategy for every English primary school to open 8.00– 6.00, 50 hours a week, 48 weeks a year, and to provide childcare, health and social services. Detailed computer records will be kept about every child. Children will be observed and tested through 'profile continuous assessment'. The aims are to protect children, improve educational outcomes and enable mothers to work. The claims (without supporting evidence) are that the policies will extend choice for women, improve gender equality, increase pupils' achievement, motivation and self esteem, improve health, boost productivity and reduce crime, cut costs of services by using resources fully, and give the partly privatised services 'a head start in marketing with faster ramp up of provision'.

The policies respect but also contravene many articles in the UN 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Children were not consulted, and some of their rights are ignored, such as rights to privacy, to family life, to play and rest, to choose where they go, what they do and who they play with in their 'free time', and even to see anyone apart from the staff and pupils in the sanitised risk-free school. The new policies, in some ways, will reduce children's life learning, independence, and access to alternative views and values. Are we relentlessly revving up children as learners, like engines? And how will this affect the reported steep rise in mental health problems among young people?

#### ***The views of care leavers on the state's role as 'parent'***

Amanda Dyer, a care leaver, and Viv Parker, a social worker, spoke about their care leavers' group RAGE - Rights Advisory Group Experts. With the State as their 'corporate parent', care leavers often live in poverty with inadequate support and at very high risk of being homeless, imprisoned, unemployed or mentally ill. RAGE

conducted one peer led telephone survey, and found high reported levels of poor housing, debt, and inadequate support from social services. RAGE raised funds and made a video to train staff about the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, with young people talking about their experiences. The Mayor and senior staff attended the launch of the video, and later involved RAGE members in reviewing tenders, commissioning an outside provider for the leaving care service, and appointing staff for the leaving care services.

Viv now works as an independent reviewing officer, chairing reviews for looked after children and planning with them how to improve the system and make the legal idea of 'corporate parent' more meaningful. Amanda concluded: 'Knowledge is power. If you know what young people are unhappy about, you have the power to improve those services. But you only find out if you ask! Involve young people in whatever work you do, and ask how they would like to get involved. Then do it!'

The conference discussed black sack 'bin bagging' of children's possessions as they are moved around the proliferating private children's homes, Government policy is to tender for the most cost effective provider which sometimes can mean a lower quality of care with companies profiting rather than service users. There was doubt that the state can be a parent, whereas many foster parents do act as real committed substitute parents.

### ***Swimming against the odds: disabled children and their families in four continents***

Gerison Lansdown (child rights consultant) researched the lives of disabled children, and what works in overcoming abuses, in South Africa, Romania, Nepal and El Salvador. An estimated 150 million children across the world are disabled, and numbers are rising. Causes include poverty, lack of health care, armed conflict, child labour, violence and accidents. Much disability is preventable. The UNCRC requires that parents should guide and care for their children. States should respect and support families but set boundaries on excessive parental powers. States and parents should prevent discrimination and promote children's best interests, with their rights to social inclusion, to an adequate standard of living, and to express their own views.

However, former Soviet states still keep disabled children in institutions where they are profoundly neglected. In countries where the children live at home, frequently the father has left, the mother is unemployed and illiterate, and the wider family and neighbours are rejecting. Countless disabled children are unloved, excluded and abused when disability is seen as a curse or a punishment. Children commented, 'Love is important, but we lack love from our parents, schools and communities.'

Key discriminations are lack of explicit laws and legal aid, lack of government records and services and named responsible officials, besides the hostile mass media. If abuse is to end, disabled children have to be seen and heard respectfully, and involved as advisers and advocates for change.

### ***Researching attitudes to children's rights in Nigeria***

Dr Abiola Ogunola (University of East London) conducts action research in the centre of Nigeria. Nigeria has 124 million people belonging to 250-1000 ethnic groups. Difficulties include gross state mismanagement, debts, adverse policies, dire poverty and malnutrition, poor public services, trafficking of children and hazardous child labour, with mushrooming private services. In the deprived rural community of seven ethnic groups, the researchers aimed to inform and involve teachers and community leaders.

The research assesses progress on the eight Millennium Development Goals:

- 1 - Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- 2 - Achieve universal primary education
- 3 - Promote gender equity and empower women

- 4 - Reduce child mortality
- 5 - Improve maternal health
- 6 - Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- 7 - Ensure environmental sustainability
- 8 - Develop a global partnership for development

The research aims: to promote and improve services for the Dukwa community through understanding some Nigerian children's own views; to see how and why development projects fail; to domesticate the UNCRC by helping Nigerians to work out how to use it to their advantage; and to work towards a Nigeria where all children are happy and respected – one day.

### ***Care giving during the AIDS pandemic in Southern Africa***

Dr Lorraine van Blerk (Brunel University) has researched extended family care for children affected by HIV/AIDS in Malawi and Lesotho, where there is among the highest prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the world. Traditionally, many children move around the extended family. AIDS has reinforced this pattern, and state care for orphans is a last resort. Lesotho has no children's homes, except for those run by NGOs. There are no government standards for the homes, no registration or inspection. Over-stretched and under-resourced relatives usually care for orphans.

Strong reciprocal, moral and implicit contracts bind the three generations of the family. The middle generation does most work, and transfers goods and services to young and old, in return for past care from their parents, and in the expectation of future care, when their children become the middle generation. However, the AIDS pandemic is removing the middle generation, leaving the older and younger ones to cope with far fewer resources, and with the risk that children may be transferred out of the extended family, further breaking the intergeneration contract.

In a study with over 800 children aged 10-17 years, 227 children created storyboards about their experiences. Many of them had to move to another household and found it very hard to adapt. Expecting that the child might leave, or die young, many adults (grandparents, uncles, step parents) relied less on longer-term reciprocity, and wanted immediate returns, requiring the child to work hard and miss school. Relatives' lack of expectations of future support from the child, and their lack of care and investment in the child's education fracture inter-generational bonds. Some children who feel exploited leave to live on the streets where life is very hard. Street children share immediate reciprocity and NGOs offer help, but neither provides the longer-term moral investments of the family. Malawi encourages family ties with children living in state care. It is vital that state interventions support the moral economy of trust and interdependence within families, and do not weaken primal ties between generations.

### ***International diversity in childhoods, families and relations with states***

Professor Helen Penn (University of East London) reviewed the toll that globalisation takes on the world's children. Increasing inequality has led to widespread suffering of children.

The World Bank and other major donor agencies have promoted early childhood programmes as a panacea/solution for some of the problems faced by young children and their families. The question is whether or not they are culturally appropriate programmes, in that they draw on Western assumptions of "developmentally appropriate practice" and Western norms about child behaviour and family life, and the ubiquity of possessions and property.

At the most extreme, it has been suggested that the spread of globalisation means the obliteration of "culture". Children are being deprived of their language and customs that are their rightful heritage, and Western ideas are like a kind of cultural poison. But there is a range of conflicting ideas about culture and identity. The notion of 'culture' has also been critiqued as essentialist, territorial and static and failing to

recognize the continuous movement and hybridization of peoples and ideas. Fixities have become kaleidoscopic fragments when, today, one in 37 people is a migrant. *All* nation states are a mixture of peoples, and the idea of the nation state itself needs questioning. On the other hand, failure to respect local 'culture' means that important indigenous knowledge is being lost, such as non-medical understandings of body and spirit, the guarding of land without owning it, and ideas about generating, accumulating and transferring knowledge between generations. Children in indigenous communities in developed countries such as Australia and Canada, for example, have been discouraged from identifying themselves with their own language, family and history, and they face painful options about whether to stay or to leave their community and join the mainstream which ignores their heritage.

The conference ended with discussions about how, in every country, the state can support but also dangerously weaken families' interdependent ties, how more theoretical research about childhood is needed, how for decades US developmental research and concepts of childhood have dominated global beliefs and policies, and how to engage with children is the best way of working with them towards more fair and realistic policies.

### **References**

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For MA course on Childhood and Children's Rights see <http://ioe.ac.uk/courses/macs>. For BA on Childhood and Youth Studies see <http://www.open.ac.uk/childhood>. For a longer report of the conference join the childhood news email list and request a copy of the conference report from [ssru@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:ssru@ioe.ac.uk).