

LOCATING CHILDREN'S TIME IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION POLICIES IN SELECT ASIAN COUNTRIES

Marella Ada V. Mancenido-Bolaños
University of Santo Tomas, Philippines

Philosophy of Childhood invites us to re-evaluate our understanding of childhood and of children. It is critical of the traditional way of understanding children's development, using adult characteristics that they do not yet possess. It is also critical of the way children are treated based on a future that adults want them to achieve. With these concepts, children's present capabilities, dreams, desires, and will are disregarded. To assume that children are innocent and need to be taught to tame their childish ways is to overlook the fact that childhood is a beautiful unfolding of a unique individual. This paper examines the concept of time in relation to childhood. This paper will argue that children comprehend time differently from adults. And yet, when adults decide to make decisions on behalf of children, children's time is often overlooked. I use early childhood education policies as an example to support this claim. I present that the more ethical way of understanding children and childhood is by placing children at the center of the policies done for them.

Keywords: childhood, time, early childhood education

INTRODUCTION

David Kennedy is one of the proponents of the Philosophy of Childhood. In his book, *The Well of Being*, he revisits the historical account of the study of childhood. He notes how child study, "became an official object of Western Science...it was institutionalized in the universities, the media, and the government offices over the last one hundred years" (Kennedy 2006,1). There is a difficulty in studying childhood because scientists and researchers problematize the qualification of childhood; others find the necessity of narrowing it down; however, they end up with disappointment because they are unable to answer the more pressing question using statistics and standardized research (Kennedy 2006, 2).

Kennedy holds that the modern scientist's child is a "culturally, historically mediated, philosophical construct disguised as the hard object of experimental science" (Kennedy 2006, 3). He adds that our understanding of the child and childhood

springs from the adult's perception of the child. It is an adult construction because the child can "only begin to reflect on themselves as children when they are aware that there is something called adulthood" (Kennedy 2006, 3). He stresses that even the developmental stages of children are considered a social construct that "uses biology as its ruling metaphor" (Kennedy 2006, 4). Kennedy was critical of developmental theory because it presents a universalized developmental process that signals abnormality or developmental defect among children who are not able to meet a particular developmental milestone for a particular age. Similarly, Gareth Matthews argues that adults consider the idea that something might be wrong with children who grow faster or slower than their peers. (Matthews 1994, 23) He notes that, "we need to take account of development that is not just enlargement. In particular, we need to take account of cognitive, emotional, and social development" (Kennedy 2006, 23).

Kennedy argues that children may be mere projections of adults. He notes that the "adult's construction of the child is at the same time his or her self-construction as an adult- whether through mechanisms of distancing children or attempting to relive, revoke, or exorcise his or her own childhood" (Kennedy 2006, 7). Educators can notice that child-rearing, at some point, becomes a reaction to the way adults revisit their childhood experiences. They make sure that they re-make beautiful experiences for their children and avoid their destructive experiences and frustrations being experienced by their children. This act can be both beneficial and harmful at the same time. It is as if the childhood experiences of children are already pre-planned by the adults who are raising them. Kennedy adds that "adults live with their own childhoods in an ambiguous state of memory and forgetting" (15).

This paper examines the concept of time in relation to childhood and education. The first part discusses the concept of time in relation to childhood. I drew upon the ideas of philosophers of childhood, specifically those of James Mensch, Barbara Weber, Walter Kohan, and David Kennedy. The second part of the paper discusses early childhood education curriculum in select Asian countries. Here, I argue that the structured curriculum leading to the preparation of children's future may pose a danger to children's progress. Finally, in the conclusion, I try to connect the concept of time to address the problems seen in early childhood curriculum.

How then should children develop? Must adults forcefully interfere in this process by directing them towards a path that they have envisioned for them? Or must adults simply allow the children to discover things on their own time? Educational institutions have created a universal curriculum for children that does not adequately take into account the individual circumstances of each child. Children are expected to achieve developmental standards and milestones. By the time a child has finished kindergarten at the age of five, s/he is already expected to learn the four basic processes in mathematics, read basic words, s/he can independently clean after himself/herself. Any deviation from this standard is considered alarming because institutions do not take into consideration the readiness of each child. For practical reasons, they simply issue an all-encompassing standard without considering the fact that children's readiness varies.¹ Educators must understand that the aim of education should be to teach the child to embrace his/her whole being. Education must enable the child to find his/her path in life. Education should not lead the child to a career, as it will naturally lead the child (Wilkinson 1993, 37). For Steiner, the child can only, "be awakened to

all his capacities if he is given knowledge and experience of all things. Practically, this means having a comprehensive curriculum and introducing the right subject at the right time (38).” When introducing lessons to a child, it is essential to consider the child’s current level of understanding. What are their present experiences? What are their current circumstances? Are the lessons to be offered today answer to what they need to learn?

TIME IN RELATION TO CHILDHOOD

James Mensch discusses children’s experience of time transitions as they age. Event-time is characterized by “familiar routines of childhood days” (Mensch 2020, 11-29). This is signified by their concept of before and after. This is characterized by the children’s understanding that one activity happens after another, such as snack time happening after I take a nap or taking a bath happening before I sleep. This can be understood by examining the sequencing of events in a child’s everyday activities. When children enter school, their concept of time changes. They transition to objective time where “time is no longer determined by events, but rather determines them” (Mensch 2020, 20). Time now controls the children’s activities. Finally, they transition to the causal time. This occurs when children learns to attach an activity to a specific time. Say, dinner time is at 7:00 pm, or the school bus arrives at 7:30 am. The crucial part here, according to Mensch, is how to transition without abruptly disrupting the children’s sense of time, leading to their disoriented notion of time and self. Children’s routine is affected when they are not able to properly transition from one concept of time to the other. Their everyday activities become more structured than spontaneous.

Adults usually associate emotions with particular events. They still remember and relive events that happened during their childhood. They do not necessarily remember the time, but they recall events and the emotions associated with them. Mensch notes that it is by employing this knowledge that the adult meets the child (Mensch 2020, 20). For him, “empathy ... is crucial for educational practice. For the adult, the effort to be empathetic consists in accessing the stage, still present within himself, of the child he encounters” (Mensch 2020, 20). Empathy is important in the formation of selfhood. How the adult presents himself/herself to the child is crucial in the development of the child. These encounters are the events that children would eventually remember when they get older. These are the same events that they will use to draw a picture of themselves in the future.

Similarly, Barbara Weber notes that, “in pedagogical situations, we often sacrifice the present moment for a future one. We explain, admonish, and educate in order to lead the child into adulthood” (Weber 2020, 31). Adults understand education in the “chronological order of human life, leading from childhood to adulthood in developmental stages, where the educator has the responsibility to guide the child’s continuous progress and development” (Weber 2020, 31). Following Maurice Merleau-Ponty, she notes that time is born of our relation to things and that our consciousness is unfolding through time (Weber 2020, 34). Weber believes that “children already live in and with time and space before they achieve an objective understanding of them” (Weber 2020, 41). For her, children do not understand time in

a chronological order; children understand time in the “complexity of the situation as a whole...they experience the moment at once and with all its elements interconnected” (Weber 2020, 41).

Unfortunately, children’s understanding of time is often hindered by the measured time of adults. Eventually, children are made to follow the chronological time imposed by the adults as their activities become measured and timed. Weber goes back to Heraclitus’ concept of time (*aion*) as a child chiding; to the “superficial explanation of Kronos killing his children is that measurable and objective time takes over *aion*, i.e., the time of... The child gets lost in the moment of play” (Weber 2020, 43).

David Kennedy and Walter Omar Kohan (2008, 6-22) also used the concept of time in relation to childhood. They note that, “life-time is not only a question of numbered movement, and that there is another way of living time that could be seen as a childlike way of being, one that belongs to a child” (Kennedy and Kohan 2008, 7). They add that, following Heraclitus’ fragment, the child could be more

...powerful in terms of *aión* than of *chrónos*, then a non-chronological, aionic, experience of time emerges and, together with it a non-chronological concept of childhood: according to this, then, childhood might well be not only a period of life but a specific form of experience in life. In other words, childhood seems to be a possibility of strength, a force, an intensity, rather than a period of time (Kennedy and Kohan 2008, 7).

Following this argument, one can say that childhood is not just a particular phase that one must overcome. It is an experience in life that brings forth a multitude of possibilities.

If one is to apply these concepts to education, *chronos* is used to organize, *Kairos* is used to introduce distinction and peculiarities, while *aion* is the time of the break. “*Aion* is the time for art, philosophy, love, and play, i.e., childhood” (Kohan 2020, 135). And yet, when one observes how children’s time in school is organized, the time allotted for this “break” is the shortest. The school allots sufficient time for children to learn science, math, grammar, and history. But very little time is allotted for the study of art, music, handwork which may include needle work, wood work, and metal work, literature, and movement. These classes are equally important, as they also help in the intellectual development of the children. Kennedy holds that “the universal characteristics of the form of life of early childhood are perhaps expressed most dramatically in children’s art and play, but are present to us more directly as linguistic, perceptual, cognitive, affective, and relational patterns” (Kennedy 2006, 20). Children can learn the values of problem-solving, creativity, and relationships if art and play are done without the limits of time and space. These experiences should be the composition of childhood.

Following Paulo Freire, Kohan notes that one must not abandon childhood. Education must foster, “the remembering and rediscovering of this aionic childhood to retake what an oppressive system has robbed from the oppressed. The oppressive systems we live in are not only economically, culturally, and politically oppressive,

but also take the voice and time of childhood from the oppressed” (Kohan 2020, 139). These can be observed in government-mandated education, where children become prey to oppressive systems of the government and the capitalists. As is known, the development of the curriculum is based on the dictates and demands of the industry. The textbooks used are the products of publishers seeking to earn more, and schools are being run like businesses instead of learning institutions. The narrative of children being used as investments springs from this circumstance. It is through this agenda that acceleration in children's experience of time becomes a problem. When we view childhood as a stage that children must overcome to be productive members of society, then we are snatching away crucial moments in children's lives. Their experience of time must not be treated as part of a hierarchical stage in their lives, because it must be experienced with a certain sense of spontaneity. They must never cease to experience the *aion* in the midst of *chronos*.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN SELECT ASIAN COUNTRIES

The case of Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs in East Asia can serve as an example of how these programs have transformed children into economic investments. ECE programs are funded by the government in the hope of turning children into competitive individuals who can boost the economy when they become adults. They also fund these programs because such prepare children to transition to the workload of elementary education. They are banking on it because children in the elementary program are being gauged, their aptitude is measured and ranked, and these rankings determine the future of the country's economy.

This is evidenced by a study conducted by I. Fang Lee, Chao-Ling Tseng, and Hong-Ju Jun (2015, 119-141), which examined the ECE programs implemented in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Korea. They discovered that the ECE programs in these countries are viewed as smart investments for the future, funded by the government with the goal of creating equal opportunities for all children, regardless of their socioeconomic background. Although the aim is to provide equal chances, the gap between the social classes widened as children from financially capable families are being enrolled in enhancement classes on top of the government-mandated and funded ECE programs. The quality of state-mandated ECE programs can also be questionable, as in the case of Kindergarten teachers in Korea who are certified by the Department of Early Childhood Education at colleges authorized by the Ministry of Education, while those teachers in childcare are generally educated at a lower level (Lee, Tseng, and Jun 2015, 131).

In Hong Kong, financially abled families took advantage of this program by enrolling their children in government-accredited pre-school, “in addition to whatever types of private international pre-school education the parents are already paying for at their own expense” (Lee, Tseng, and Jun 2015, 125-126).

Meanwhile, in Taiwan, “children are now politically constructed as human resources for the future. Embedded in this system of reasoning is a narrative of education as investment through which appropriate education should be held

accountable for producing and cultivating highly skilled workers/laborers” (Lee, Tseng, and Jun 2015, 126). They also subsidize pre-school education. Initially, children who are enrolled in registered private institutions receive NT\$10,000. This was contested later on because children enrolled in public pre-schools are not given a subsidy. To date, children enrolled in private preschools receive NT\$30,000 while those enrolled in public preschools receive NT\$14,000 (129). These examples show that the voucher programs initiated by the government benefited the children from middle-class families more than the children from the lower class. Instead of providing equal opportunities for these children, it has created a wider division between them. It has created a bigger advantage for middle-class children.

The case of the ECE program in the Philippines is similar to that of Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. According to Section 2 of Republic Act 10157:

The State should provide equal opportunities for all children to avail of accessible mandatory and compulsory kindergarten education that effectively promotes physical, social, intellectual, emotional, and skills stimulation and values formation to sufficiently prepare them for formal elementary schooling.

The government, however, only subsidized the mandated Kindergarten program offered in public schools, which usually cater to children from low-income families. Children from middle-class families are usually enrolled in private kindergartens. They get private tutorial classes or enroll in play schools and other non-academic programs. This is to ensure that the children will pass the entrance admission tests in high-ranking and established elementary and secondary schools, as well as universities.

The aim of the Republic Act 10157, which is to provide equal opportunities to children, has yet to be achieved. Additionally, if we examine the aim of the K-12 program, we will realize that it is not primarily concerned with the well-being of the children; rather, it focuses on their skills development and employability. This is stated in the definition of the K-12 program provided by the Department of Education:

The K to 12 Program covers Kindergarten and 12 years of basic education (six years of primary education, four years of Junior High School, and two years of Senior High School [SHS]) to provide sufficient time for mastery of concepts and skills, develop lifelong learners, and prepare graduates for tertiary education, middle-level skills development, employment, and entrepreneurship (DepEd, RA 10533).

The K-12 program aims to equip its graduates with the necessary skills that will enable them to be immediately absorbed into the workforce. Industries, however, have apprehensions in hiring employees who are not graduates of a four-year degree. Therefore, K-12 graduates who are no longer financially capable of pursuing a college degree are left with jobs that do not guarantee equitable pay and job security. Thus, the aim of offering equal opportunities to children regardless of their social class has not been achieved.

If the policies for early childhood curriculum are this rigid, we are sacrificing an integral part of children's development, which is founded on activities done in a spontaneous manner. If we are raising children to become adults who will contribute to the growth of our economy, then we are failing to raise humane adults. So much is missed in this kind of system.

John Dewey, in his work *The Child and the Curriculum* (1955, 91), argues that the child should be at the center of the curriculum. He (1955, 93) insists that

a child's life is integral, a total one. He passes quickly and readily from one topic to another, but is not conscious of the transition or break. There is no conscious isolation, hardly a conscious distinction. The things that occupy him are held together by the unity of the personal and social interests that his life carries along. Whatever is uppermost in his mind constitutes to him, for the time being, the whole universe. The universe is fluid and fluent; its contents dissolve and re-form with amazing rapidity. But after all, it is the child's own world.

And yet, adults who draft policies for children's education continue to neglect the child's present life because they are preoccupied with what the child should be in the future. For Dewey, this classification studies the science of ages and not that of the experience of the child (Dewey 1955, 94). Our obsession with standards causes us to forget that the basis of our standards should be the child's experiences.

The neglect of children's well-being extends beyond the educational system. It is also evident in the entertainment industry, marketing, and advertising, where children have become the constant targets. Entrepreneurs have created a huge market for anything that is child-related. They have created extravagant gender reveal parties and baby showers, milk formula and educational materials that guarantee better mental development, hyped-up pre-kindergarten playschool programs, private academic tutorials, and talent enhancement classes. And yet, when we add all these together, it does not assure us that these products really contribute anything to child development.

Henry Giroux, in his book *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* (1999), provides a thorough discussion of how Disney has gained control over the childhood of every American child. They have dominated broadcast media and print ads, shaping the daily lives of Americans. Once a movie is released, merchandise is sold, Disney partners with other companies to sell their products, the stories are released as storybooks, and a new attraction is added to Disneyland, making Disney earn more. Accordingly, "more than 200 million people a year watch a Disney film or home video, 395 million watch a Disney TV show every week, 212 million listen or dance to Disney music...more than 40 million people a year visit Disney theme parks" (Giroux 1999, 19). Disney claims to be helping in educating children; however, the sad fact is that they have used children as a means to expand their company.

Disney's animated films have also ruled over children's culture. Giroux considers animated films to be teaching machines. It presents wholesome entertainment, teaches children valuable lessons, such as those of family and friendship, and encourages their sense of adventure. However, Giroux is quick to invite

parents and educators to look into the messages behind the animation. He noted that the films contain ideological messages that may have a negative impact on the child. It is clear that Disney takes advantage of children's innocence, as it is through this innocence that they can build a very stable market. This is proof that children have become easy targets for the adult agenda.

CONCLUSION

From these discussions, we see examples of how children are ignored in drafting educational policies and even manipulated to build strong economies. Children are being exploited by business firms to increase their profits. To sum up, all of these practices have failed to treat children ethically. These practices failed to appreciate the true meaning of childhood; instead, they took advantage of it. These practices have damaged the childhood of children. Educational institutions, by establishing ranking and reward systems, have made parents and children competitive. Marketing firms, by introducing unnecessary products to children, have changed the way children appreciate the world. In our efforts to prepare children for their future, we have overlooked the importance of their present. We have forgotten the importance of their concept of time as we rushed them to adjust to our pace. We have not paid attention to their need for space because we try to shape them to be the person we want them to be.

The child unfolding through time is such a beautiful concept that many of us will no longer witness because our concept of childhood has been greatly affected by our society. Parents and educators have missed the developmental milestones unique to each child because they were so consumed by the idea of measuring them based on the standard set forth by institutions. We have busied ourselves in turning children into competitive adults who will succeed in the future, but in doing so, we have forgotten their present.

Mensch's concept of event time, objective, and causal time is something that we might want to consider when dealing with children. Because the "events" they experience during the "event time" are the ones that they remember as they age. These are the ones that impact their understanding of the world. Weber's idea that a child understands time in the complexity of its wholeness rather than chronologically could help us when we structure children's activities in school and at home. Kennedy and Kohan's explication of the concept of *aion*, *chronos* and *kairos* could also aid in crafting policies for children.

The sad reality persists that when we organize children's activities, the only thing that comes to mind is the convenience of the adults. When a child is born, elders advise mothers to establish a routine for their children and avoid letting their sleeping and feeding patterns dictate the mother's activities. When children are enrolled in preschool, parents consider how the child's class schedule would affect their usual everyday activities without thinking about whether or not the chosen class hour is too early or too late for the child. In pre-school, children's activities were dictated by the strict schedule arranged by the teacher. Activities are timed, their performance measured, their exams graded, and ranked. Lessons given were beyond the mandated curriculum because the school board wants to make sure that their "graduates" will

make it to the top elementary schools. We may consider all these actions to be unethical, because these actions avoided the human other, the child.

The amount of activities we give to children no longer allows them to live and appreciate their childhood. Time spent on children's games is replaced by time allotted for more academic and non-academic tutorials. After attending school, children are sent to tutorial centers, and by the time they get home, they are all too spent to even play. In one of the conversations I had with a pediatrician, she narrates that more children are coming to the clinic with unexplained medical conditions such as persistent headaches, stomach pains, and hair loss- she associates these with stress. As an adult working on the philosophy of childhood, it becomes difficult to fathom how elementary children suffer from this kind of stress. Children are overburdened by adults' desire to prepare them for their future. Weber is correct, then, we have abandoned the child's present in our desire to secure their future.

Revisiting the ECE programs discussed earlier, nowhere in the program can we see the inclusion of children's time. Tasks are assigned without considering their readiness for these tasks. What is deemed important is the school's compliance with government-mandated curriculum. When the government advocated for the idea of "No Child Left Behind," it did not create effective ways to level the playing field for children from the lower and middle classes. As a result, more children were left behind. If ECE programs continue to focus on honing children's skills to make them employable in the future, we can only be certain that the means to achieve this goal will continue to disregard the well-being of children.

What would children look back on when they become adults? What experiences will they share? Will they be able to recall anything from the event time and *aion*? How valuable will these experiences be? When these children grow up, can we proudly say that we have raised them well? Can we say that we have provided them with the best conditions for them to discover themselves?

What is needed is to prioritize the psychological, emotional, and physical well-being of children as we prepare them for the bigger challenges of life, rather than immersing them in a competitive, metric-centered, and market-driven environment. With the current trajectory of ECE programs, we can secure the future of human capital, but we will fail tremendously in cultivating humanity.

NOTES

1. I have witnessed this happen to my son. When he was enrolled in a traditional kindergarten, he was expected to answer word problems in math, even before he could read and spell properly on his own. When he transferred to a Steiner school, he was given space and time to determine his readiness for reading and doing arithmetic. By the time he felt ready to read, he would simply pick up a book and start reading. He did not have to go through the grueling task of being forced to read by sounding off the letters and syllables until he formed a word. There was no resistance to learning because learning was not forced on him.

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