

The social construction of childhood: explored with reference to Matilda.

Approaches to understanding childhood, notably explored by Aries (1960) and Rousseau (1972) show that childhood is subjective. Ba's (2021, p.74) research considers that childhood is socially constructed as there are many different aspects of childhood, which differ from person to person. Childhood as a social construct is explained and illustrated through discourses of childhood, Dahl uses these, through his characters, to display different perspectives on childhood. This assignment will present the argument that childhood is a social construct, with reference to Matilda, written by Roald Dahl in 1988 (Roald Dahl, 2018).

It can be argued that the social construction of childhood is influenced by cultural differences. Research presented by Gustafsson and Kalwij (2006, p.6) identifies that Sweden has the oldest school starting age at 7, whereas Northern Ireland begins at 4. The 'differences in cultural styles' can impact a child's educational achievements. There is a stark difference in what is believed to be best for the child. The Swedish perspective is that there is more value to developing a child's curiosity and engagement in play, for their overall development in Early Years (Grotewell and Burton, 2008, p.128). Whereas in the United Kingdom the perspective is based on school readiness (EYFS.info, 2019). Child development is impacted by cultural differences through their beliefs and behaviours, as explained by Keller (2020, pp.27-46). As a result, the wider society is impacted as these behaviours lead to social norms for that culture. Fletcher and Crawford (2013, p.111) states that 'social behaviour is an expression of culture'.

School starting age is not the only way education has been impacted by the social construction of childhood. Education has developed throughout history. This is supported by Fevre (2016, p.39) who outlines that school and education were made compulsory by the 1876 Royal Commission on the Factory Acts. During the 19th century legislation was created to end child labour, which previously led to children being exploited, which is explored by Jarvis (2019, p.47). Evidence by Murdoch (2006, p.129) to suggest that before the Industrial Revolution, a large majority of the children who were educated were from a wealthy background. However, after the industrial revolution, mandatory education was more widespread and included those children from a lower socioeconomic background (Tenbus, 2015, p.3). Consequently, the introduction of education laws meant that almost all the United Kingdom was better educated, which lead to the development of cognitive development and power, considers Allen (2009, pp.1-344).

13th century onwards marked the beginning of the concept of childhood. According to Phillipe Aries' theory, which is explored in his book *Centuries of Childhood*, that childhood was nonexistent in Medieval times (Cited in Cunningham, 1998, p.1197). He came to this conclusion, after his research showed that children often worked from an early age (Schmitz *et al.*, 2004, p.106), which would often lead to mortality due to underdevelopment and being in harsh conditions. In addition, there were no legal differences between children and adults, which is supported by Bastos and Rabionvich (2010, p.238) who states the child was often perceived in the same way an adult was. This is also supported by Campbell (1988, pp.165-175), whose research considers that

the art in which Aries based his interpretation of childhood through, included children who look remarkably like adults. Aries argues that the socially constructed nature of childhood produces different attitudes and behaviours, which explains the subjectiveness of childhood (Haferkamp and Smelser, 1992). Perceptions of childhood have changed throughout history due to social changes and the shift in dominant discourse.

The industrial revolution led to changes in society. As explained by Anderson (2019, p.329) changes were due to the change in structure of Western economies, switching to producing goods on a mass scale. Humphries (2010, p.32) mentioned that as a result there was a shift from agricultural work to industrial work, meaning that people travelled from countryside to developing towns and cities. Cain and Patterson (2012, p.229) highlights that the change saw many children working alongside their parents in factories. This created an attitude that children were commercially beneficial, with the additional argument that children made less negative impact on society whilst working (Humphries, 2013, pp. 395-418). One of the main philosophers to identify an issue with the industrial revolution was Karl Marx, who identified the differences in wealth between the factory owners and factory workers (Wrigley, 2013, pp.1-10). This is a comparable situation to what children often experienced, who were exploited throughout the industrial revolution supports Honeyman (2016). This is explored in literature such as Charles Dicken's *Oliver Twist*, which was published in 1838, through the themes of poverty and societal attitudes. (Charles Dickens Info, 2021). At this time, Puritanical discourse was the dominant discourse, demonstrated in the attitudes

previously mentioned. In modern times, Rousseau is referred to as the father of early childhood education (Bjarveit and Panayotidis, 2014, p.17). Rousseau challenged Puritanical discourse as he believed that children were born innocent, which contradicted the belief that children were a product of sin (Howlett, 2013, p.64).

A key aspect discussed within puritanical discourse expresses that all children are born evil. Marten (2009, p.110) identified that many adults believed that children were a result of sin. This supports the argument that childhood is socially constructed as the way children were treated was influenced by the overall negative perception of childhood, claims Kassem and Taylor (2009, p.24). There is evidence to suggest that Mrs. Trunchbull's perception of childhood mirrors the ideas presented in the puritanical discourse. This is made clear when Mrs. Trunchbull refers to the children as 'a load of garbage' (Dahl, 1988, p.135). The use of the word garbage allows the reader to experience a negative connotation, which creates feelings of dislike and repulsion. In order to make sure children did not turn into savages (Ashcroft, 2000, pp.184-202) they were made to follow strict rules and regulations.

The rules and philosophy of religion were predominant in Puritan's beliefs. This idea is supported by Vetterli and Bryner (1996, p.51) who states that Puritan philosophy was very common and their 'moral and intellectual reach was far and wide'. A key philosopher was Jonathan Edwards whose ideas were heavily influenced by the Puritanical concept of childhood (Allen, 2016, p.1). Therefore, at this time society was heavily influenced by religion, which in turn impacted the social construct of childhood. Research carried out by Agorastos *et al.* (2014, pp.93-101) who links religion to social

norms, moral principles and ideals. One-way Puritan culture was impacted by religion was through their need to follow rules and regulations from the bible (Hakim, 2003, p.59). Puritans carried out corporal punishment if children did not follow the rules (Saunders and Goddard, 2009, p.5). This ideology is evident in *Matilda*, through the character of Mrs. Trunchbull, who is often seen to be handing out unusual corporal punishment stated by Miss Honey: 'Miss Trunchbull deals very, very severely with anyone who gets out of line in school'. Obedience is evident in puritan society as children had to follow the same religious rules as adults, failure to do so often resulted in physical discipline (Johnson, 2002, p.5)

Punishment is an undercurrent of puritanical discourse. There is evidence provided by Quinn (2005, pp.477-516) that shows that puritans believed that children needed punishment when they misbehaved. This is due to scriptures from the bible which advised this, considers Fletcher (1994, pp.325-346). In the eyes of Puritans, corporal punishment led to obedience, to God as well as the parents (Cox, 2002, pp.1-248). In the 18th century punishment often came from teachers, during a child's education, this could greatly impact a child's self-worth (Lochman and Mbiti, 2005, p.452). Punishment is also a key aspect equally important to *Matilda*. This theme is presented, strongly, by Mrs. Trunchbull, when analysing her methods of interacting with the children. Mrs. Trunchbull's methods correspond to the belief that if children disobey, they need punishment. A key aspect of Mrs. Trunchbull's punishment is that she is unfair when choosing who to punish this is expressed by Hortensia, who states 'When she doesn't know who the culprit is, she makes a guess at it' (Dahl, 1988, p.102). Mrs. Trunchbull

exploits her authority over the children, using unusual methods of punishment, such as physically picking up a young girl and throwing her across the playground. The way Mrs. Trunchbull is a dominant character is a masculine stereotype, which is conflict to the general stereotype of women (Hentschel *et al.*, 2019, pp.1-19). Stereotypes are prevalent throughout the characterisation of both Miss Honey and Miss Trunchbull. The idea that women are less prominent in workplaces, due to sexual discrimination is presented through research carried out by Gino *et al.* (2015, pp.12354-12359). Dahl explored the relationship between masculine and feminine personalities, displaying the contrast between the teacher and headmistress. To illustrate, during an interaction Mrs. Trunchbull shout, 'Oh, do shut up, Miss Honey! You're as wet as any of them' (Dahl, 1988, p.149) which identifies the perceived weakness of Miss Honey, which can be linked to her femineity.

Puritan discourse holds children responsible for their actions. As explained by O'Malley (2018, p.296) children were expected to act like adults, as there was no clear distinction between the role of adults and children. Chores were a core expectation of children, which were heavily influenced by gender. For instance, boys spent their days hunting and girls carried out domestic tasks (Hughes, 2010, p.15). If children did not meet the expectations of the adults, they were seen as disobedient. According to Ralston (2021, pp.1-450) children were publicly humiliated by receiving corporal punishment in front of a group of adults. Ralston (2021, pp.1-450) also explored how children were made to give confessions publicly, which held them accountable for their actions. A similar concept is utilised in *Matilda*, when Mrs. Trunchbull punishes Bruce

Bogtrotter for stealing a piece of cake. Firstly, Mrs. Trunchbull makes Bruce confess to eating her slice of cake, this is met with some resistance, but in the end, he confesses in front of his classmates. His punishment is to eat the whole cake, which would cause some humiliation if he were to be sick. This is another example of Mrs. Trunchbull's cruel and unusual punishments. The way Mrs. Trunchbull speaks to Bruce correlates with the previously mentioned ideas of the puritanical discourse, such as calling him a 'little brat'. Significantly, according to Pollock (1983, p.16) childhood is something that needs to be closely controlled, through discipline.

The Age of Enlightenment was impacted by the Scientific Revolution. Research carried out by Thornhill *et al.* (2009, pp.113-131) identified the realisation of the power of the human mind. Romantic discourse was an opposing discourse to puritanical which was the dominant discourse during the Industrial Revolution, focusing on emotions and nature (Smith, 2018, p.3). Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a leading philosopher during this time and using his book *Emile* challenged the ideas surrounding children at the time. Based on his ideas children were seen as innocent and that they developed in a natural and progressive way (McDowall Clark, 2016, p.142). As *Matilda* is set in England it is important to be aware of a British view on childhood. A large majority of parents have the belief that children need to be protected. The year after *Matilda* was published The Children Act 1989 was established in England. This established a benchmark for care of children (O'Halloran, 2021, p.231). This demonstrates the fundamental belief that children need to be protected.

Children evoke an image of purity and innocence. A fundamental aspect of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's work was that children are born into innocence, natural goodness and purity (Brown, 2017, pp.1-240). This discourse also outlines that a child should be allowed the opportunity to experience childhood with their natural development progression (Kassem *et al.*, 2009, pp.1-232). The belief of innocence is emphasised by concern as children are viewed as unable to protect themselves from danger, which is confirmed by Hothersall and Maas-Lowit (2010, p.38). As a feminine character Miss Honey is stereotypical, as explained by Vincent and Ball (2006, p.112) as women are seen to be naturally caring. This can be seen when Matilda and Miss Honey interact as Matilda retrieves water from a well, Miss Honey states 'Just hook the bucket on to the end of the rope and lower it down, but don't fall in yourself' (Dahl, 1988, p.181). This expresses a difference between the capabilities of adults and children as Miss Honey can carry out the task without risk, whereas she sees risk for Matilda. Rousseau viewed the child as constructed innocently (Burwick, 2015, p.36). Subsequently, he believed that children 'naturally develop' (Kassem and Taylor, 2009, p.19). In modern society, Piaget's theory of cognitive development considers natural development possible. Piaget (Cited in Atkinson, 2007, p.187) offers the opinion that knowledge is constructed through the child's personal desires.

Rousseau considers, in his novel *Émile*, the concept of development stages. Samuel (2021, p.281) also provides evidence that from an educational perspective, Rousseau believed there were five stages of a child's development. The first stage of development, according to Rousseau, is infancy. Due to Matilda's age this is the stage

she is in as it applies to children from birth to age five. Throughout the book Dahl explores Matilda's own development as she 'could read fast and well' (Dahl, 1988, p.5) at age four. Rousseau made a link between physical weakness and children's susceptibility to corruption (Domines Veliki and Duffy, 2020, p.95). Blundell (2012, p.29) identifies that because of the innocent nature of children, adults believed that their minds could be tainted by society. Matilda's parents have a negative mindset towards education which can be acknowledged through Matilda's father's outburst directed at Miss Honey 'Who wants to go to university, for heaven's sake! All they learn there is bad habits' (Dahl, 1988, p.93). Velkley (2002, pp.1 - 192) confirms that Rousseau often criticised society and was trying to make changes. In a similar way, Miss honey is trying to change Matilda's parents' perception of their youngest, female child.

The discussion of nature and nurture is fundamental to childhood. Ideas set forward by Rousseau offer an epigenesis approach, considering both nature and nurture as important aspects of development, which is supported by Kerr (2009, p.157). Veale (2020) relates that Rousseau believed that maturity affects motivation to learn, this supports the argument of nature playing a role in this discourse. In comparison to the character Matilda, her motivation to learn came before other children her own age as 'by the time she was three, Matilda had taught herself to read'. This links to Rousseau's ideas about education, as identified by Oelkers (2009, pp.679-698), which involved the concept of negative education. Based on the research carried out by Monterio (2005, pp.1-45) states that negative education involves creating a learning environment which

strays away from traditional learning environments, which Rousseau believed were forced onto the child. McDonough (2021, pp.159-186) supports this and their own research insists that negative education is a solution to the belief that children need to be protected. Haynes and Murriss (2013, pp.217-227) Rousseau offered a different style of teaching which was child-led and gave the child freedom to explore education. According to Rousseau children did not need to learn to read or write during the identified developmental stage of childhood: five to twelve years old (Duka, 2006, p.33). While this is the case, Rousseau also believed that nurture equally contributes to romantic discourse. The responsibility of the teacher is to encourage learning opportunities, according to Mallon (2020, p.32). Miss Honey's aim is to give the children the best foundation for learning, this is evident when she states, "I myself want to help you learn as much as possible while you are in this class "This outlines the idea that Miss Honey feels as though even if Matilda has an innate ability to be smart, she still needs to be nurtured and led in the right direction. Throughout the book, with the exception of Mrs. Phelps, the librarian, she is the only adult to realise the potential of Matilda. Mirroring the ideas of Romantic discourse, Miss Honey provides Matilda with a maternal and caring approach to teaching, which supports the child's holistic development, as well as educational. Coekelbergh (2015, p.110) explored the idea that Rousseau believed children solely learn from experience, which is important to acknowledge when analysing holistic development.

In conclusion it can be argued that childhood is socially constructed. The concept of childhood depends on what was socially relevant at the time. Over time, as society

changes, so do the discourses surrounding childhood, as identified by James and James (2017, p.106). The transition from puritanical discourse being prominent, to the romantic discourse being more popular was a direct result of the industrial revolution and important philosophers, such as Jean-Jacque Rousseau (McDowell Clark, 2016). Underlying all discourses is the impact of religion. Both romantic and puritanic discourse were heavily influenced by what religious beliefs were expected of individuals (Johnson, 2002). Children were either seen as good or bad, this demonstrates the evidence of stereotypes in each discourse. This is expressed in the different opinions from Bjarveit and Panayontidis (2014), who explored romantic discourse and Howlett (2013) who considered puritanical discourse, whose work is still relevant today. Specifically, ideas from romantic discourse are still used in Early Years education and care. Firstly, romantic discourse was highly influential in the creation of kindergarten, states Aslanian (2015, p.153). Research carried out by Fredrickson (2013) identifies that the ideas from romantic discourse, such as 'love, care and maternalism' (Aslanian, 2015, p.153) are crucial to child development. International research carried out by Fröbel (1980) highlighted that the concept of 'love care and maternalism' (Aslanian, 2015, p.153) were the key concept of early years education systems. Furthermore, legislation called 'Keeping Children Safe in Education 2019' (Department for Education, 2018) has been put into place to ensure the safeguarding and welfare of children in school settings. This is heavily influenced by the Romantic discourse that children are innocent and can be corrupted by society.

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