Chapter 4
Personalised Learning and Changing Conceptions of Childhood and Youth

by
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Hébert and Hartley take the example of Canada as indicative of changing conceptions of youth that occur through societies, shaped by moral, socio-economic, political and legal influences. These include the appearance of a more liberal Christianity, the growth of industrial and agricultural productivity, the spread of literacy and the rise of the middle class, the greater emancipation of women, and enlarged notions of citizenship. Two particular processes – the advent of mass schooling and the post-war development of teenage youth culture in advertising and through the media – have been instrumental in extending childhood and shaping youth. Educational policy makers and researchers have a responsibility to understand conceptions of children and youth and to recognise the forces that shape them and young people must be recognised as whole. Educators are called upon to see beyond broad social representations of children and youth so as to support their strengths, legitimacy, diversity and vitality.

There are many childhoods. What is meant by conceptions of “child” and “youth” has changed over time and in different historical contexts. In each major period in history, there have been different ideas about what children are like and how best to teach and socialise them. Today, these images are shifting in new directions – towards new definitions that challenge our fundamental conceptions not only of childhood and youth but also of the state. As we progress towards the knowledge society, the mass conception of children is shifting to a more individualistic approach. Dramatic societal shifts result in conflicting positions, policies, and

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practices. When considering the reform of public service and education, it is essential to keep the fluidity of the conceptions of childhood and youth in mind for they are central to the current debate on the personalisation of education.

Identity as key to self-understanding

Educational concerns today can best be summed up by the key words standards, curriculum reform, accountability and testing. The logic is that if the bar is raised, then students will perform better. Standardised textbooks, curriculum and learning frameworks, and better teaching and learning will ensue. If schools are held accountable, educators will produce results. If students are tested to see what they know and are able to do, both teachers and students will be motivated to avoid the consequences that come with low scores. While this approach to raising student achievement has its merits and its proponents, educators who focus solely on factors that are external to students are likely to achieve only limited success. Children and youth cannot be standardised. Young people’s sense of agency and of self heavily influences their self-worth and their educational performance, all of which is also socially conditioned. If young people are to succeed as thinkers, as learners, and as humans who make valuable contributions to society, more must be known about them than their scores on standardised measures of achievement.

Conceptions of childhood and youth – as socially and historically constructed representations of identities within particular economic, cultural and political contexts – are central to the success or failure of students at school (Chunn, 2003; Sadowski, 2003). Schools are probably the most important context shaping the identities of children and youth – as strong learners in particular intellectual disciplines, as athletes on a team, as citizens and members of society. How educators understand young people and how children and adolescence understand themselves is critical to their ability to comprehend themselves as social actors and to their capacity for acting upon society to achieve their intellectual and career goals as well as state-established goals, in reciprocal transformations of self, school and society. It is essential to know who young people are and how they have been constructed.

The construction of childhood – an historical perspective

Childhood, as we know it today, was invented during the modern industrial era. By the 17th century, the child was constructed as separate and distinct from the adult. Childhood ended around the age of seven, with a
change of attire marking the passage to adulthood. This was consistent with the separation of mind and matter, with reason as the means for classification, order, and hierarchy, with the religious focus on the individual soul. A distinct group was created that needed protection from a corrupt society. The school became the perfect vehicle for the construction, protection and reformation of the child.

Since the 18th century, the conception of childhood encapsulated in the bourgeois family model has become increasingly dominant in Western countries (Chunn, 2003; Rooke and Schnell, 1982, 1983). The influential Jean Piaget (1896-1980) proposed that children individually construct their worlds from inside out, a process that is both self-directed and self-regulated. Piaget describes the child as a developing scientist, systematically examining problems in the real world, hypothesising and learning how to solve problems through discovery. He (1957) emphasised the mental over the active, thinking over doing, abstract over the concrete, adult over child, rationality over irrationality, and ultimately believed in the innocence of children. Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st, children and youth have been increasingly defined as subordinate and dependent upon adults. Subject to stringent monitoring and censure for engaging in adult pastimes, children and youth have also been protected from the corrupting adult influences. Thus, an originally constructivist middle-class “angelic” conception of childhood, linked to the rise of literacy and the middle class, was over-applied and universalised well beyond its social, class, cultural and philosophical roots. As such, the model contributed to a demonising conception of the child and youth as delinquent and deviant.

**Historical examples from Canada**

The emerging changes in the way that we think about children are congruent in the ways that we think about learning. We can write a story about Canada’s history over the past three centuries that considers the changing conceptions of childhood in terms of the sense of agency, individuality, autonomy, power, emotional expression, voice, and social roles of young people.

Colonial childhood in Canada was constructed somewhat differently than in Europe. The political economy of extraction from the new world to enrich the old, the minimal influence of the church and state, and the mixed origins of the European settlers tempered the entrenchment of customs and community bonds (Janovicek, 2003, p. 35). In the new world, children were encouraged to be self-reliant in order to suit social and economic patterns of colonial life and developed new identities. Childhood and adolescence were considered life stages separate from adulthood (Moogk, 2003; Pollard, 2003).
Society changed dramatically when Canada was created as a confederated state (1867). It was a time of phenomenal population growth that included massive migration, which in turn produced new sources of tensions within Canadian society. Aboriginal populations were more and more marginalised, and existing English-French and Aboriginal conflicts were exacerbated (McLeod, 1979). From the 1870s to the 1930s, childhoods continued to be constructed in the context of economic and political ideologies, with powerful nationalising agendas that were blueprints for progress. The age of industrialisation was also the age of nationalism. Children and youth were conceptualised as cultural, economic and political commodities. Schools were the socialising agency and had become an agent of the state: public schools taught citizenship, as a form of Anglo-conformity and incipient capitalism.

In the context of a national transformation, the new social policies on the child of this era had focused on the rearing of children in family settings, maintaining and protecting health, transforming the means of schooling and education, and preventing children from becoming a burden on society (Sutherland, 2000; Coulter, 2003). These social policies were elaborated in the context of decades-long struggles and debates on public education, its purposes, practices and outcomes, informed by many school-based initiatives, progressive ideas as well as the work of professional and educational associations (Houston and Prentice, 1988). Over time, agreement developed on what was termed the “new education” in 1915 in Ontario: a) the importance of the home in shaping the next generation; b) the need for an aggressive policy of Canadianisation as part of the programme of forming and reforming society through education; c) various elements of the “new education” of the times, such as agriculture as a school subject, school gardens, manual training, domestic science, consolidated schools; and d) the widespread indifference of communities, school trustees and many teachers as the most serious obstacles to educational and social reform. These debates and reforms set the stage for the progressivism movement in Canada.

During the turmoil of the Great Depression in the Thirties, the notion of progress was itself questioned. Remarkable social and educational change ensued in the name of progressivism. The social, political and educational changes completed the transition from laissez-faire state of the late 19th century to a welfare state. Marked by emerging farmer-labour alliances in the 1920s, and in combination with the economic crises of the 1930s, political reorganisation occurred across Canada. Social, political and educational experimentation was rampant, and one such experiment was progressive education. The post-Second World War period also saw the re-introduction of human rights. Emerging social and economic rights included
the universal rights of children to education and welfare, as an avowed national aim and international idea for post war social policy (Marshall, 2003; Bruno-Jofré, 1996).

The growing hegemony of the middle-class family pattern among Canadian working classes accompanied the development of the welfare state, set against a backdrop of an emergent corporate capitalism, rapid urbanisation and the implementation of mass democracy. This fuelled moral and social reform movements aimed at inculcating the norms associated with the bourgeois family model among so-called deviant populations (Chunn, 2003). A concern for order and a more disciplined society motivated educational reformers who called for greater social efficiency. Social reconstruction was the new goal and it lasted until the mid-century.

Modern education, then, had a number of key purposes: to teach youngsters the means for social control; to disseminate knowledge; to meet the public demand for social improvement; to meet the demand for industrial efficiency via practical subjects; and to meet the need to make each individuals into a productive social unit (Sutherland, 2002), while perpetuating identifiable values and meeting pre-determined, clear, specific ends. It was during this period that children and youth began to be conceptualised as scientific inquirers and discoverers, as participants in democracy, and as bearers of rights. This reflected a radical change in socio-political and educational thinking about young people. Challenging the bourgeois conception of childhood as a time of preparation for the future, these new conceptions recognised the historical realities of childhood in Canadian contexts and the contemporary emphasis on living in the present.

Thus, the children of the Colonial and Confederate periods were precursors of lives to come decades later, in which young people are recognised as being entitled to human dignity during their childhood and youth. Young people became subjects in the here and now, social actors who are self-motivated, cooperative individuals. Nonetheless, competing conceptions placed children and youth in positions of dependency to enforce middle-class views of young people among those who were not. This perpetuated the negative view of the bourgeois child as a dependant, possibly as a ward of court; as a recipient, unequal, marginalised and passive. The youth as radical straddled more than one conception: as social actor and citizen as well as troublemaker insisting on being treated by others certain ways.

Concerns and demands for reform formed a comprehensive attack on progressive education throughout the 1950s, and continued as profound social changes emerged in the 1960s. Some religious, political and cultural groups complained that traditional social and ethical values were being
undermined. Another complaint came from universities who criticised progressive education for having abandoned all standards of rigour, treating subjects superficially, and contributing to the decline of social, ethical, and political values (Neatby, 1953). Calls for the primacy of “core” school subjects emerged. Educational mandates and systems had to keep up with the seemingly insatiable demands of industry and bureaucracy in the new technocratic society (Mazurek, 1999). Both labour and professional requirements required increased levels of technical and intellectual skills as the economy changed fundamentally. The educational response, predictably, was a return to a core of essential knowledge and disciplines, and a reaffirmation of traditional values.

The rise of prosperity in Canada in the 1960s generated a powerful momentum to economic and social changes, leading once again to educational reform. Prosperity resulted in a chronic shortage of personnel especially in technical fields and the professions, including a serious teacher shortage; an explosion in the budgets and student populations in schools and post-secondary institutions; and an increase in schooling options (Mazurek, 1999). The 1960s heralded an era of incredible social and cultural innovation and experimentation. This feeling took form, in overt rebellion against tradition and authority, in the sexual revolution and drug use, in the redefinition of identity through humanistic psychology and cooperative living arrangements, and in a more direct democratic participation in the student rights movement and demonstrations.

An increased awareness and emphasis on world affairs also permeated society as well as the schools in the 1970s and 1980s as a result of changing immigration patterns (Osborne, 1996), stemming from the introduction in 1967 of a non-racist merit system. Over a million and a half people entered the country in the decade from 1968, originating mostly from Asia and the Caribbean, with a concomitant drop of immigrants from Europe. Once dismissed, the hyphenated Canadians were here to stay.

This period heralds major shifts in changing conceptions of childhood and youth, with the Canadian Charter and the UN Convention on the Rights of Children providing their legal bases. Recognising that children need a cultural education flowed from the federal multiculturalism policy of 1971, followed in the 1990s with the recognition of rights to a cultural and linguistic education to safeguard and develop identities. With student-centred educational reforms, all marginalised groups made great strides in obtaining equity rights to self-determination and to parental control of education. The ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC) provides a more general basis for conceptions of childhood and youth as social actors and active citizens, although the Convention's
meanings for educational policy, curriculum and pedagogy have yet to be fully tested (Howe and Covell, 2005).

Contemporary conceptions of children and youth are more sharply drawn than in previous periods. Children and youth as consumers permeate the discourses of educational and legal reforms, along three dimensions: as labourers who produce goods and services, as consumers who spend their limited resources, and as commodities whose images and music market goods and services. The conception of children and youth as consumers within a global marketplace limits citizenship and misconstrues the power of the consumer as freedom rather than understanding it as devolving from economic pursuits of international corporations. Movies contributed to the shift of values towards the culture of personality and self-indulgence of consumerism. The demonising conception remains strong and is seen in new forms of racism which target indigenous and immigrant children and youth, as well as in the highest youth incarceration rates among the industrialised countries (Schissell, 1997; in press). Canadian youth of immigrant origin create a sense of self that is strategic, solving various types of problems that are particular to the process of integration, negotiating their differences, making friends, and accumulating social capital to facilitate their insertion into school and society. Delayed adulthood is yet another characteristic of late modern life, as none of the previous markers of passage serve today to clearly delineate adulthood.

Children and youth as learners are essential to the educational marketplace. The new student is constructed as an independent, autonomous, self-directed and self-motivated learner, in the face of serious cutbacks, lean pedagogies and support services. Yet in reality, students face class and racial differences, struggle with financial and family responsibilities, and continue to experience poverty and self-doubt. Equity is taken up as an issue of parental choice rather than as claims for the inclusion and fair treatment of the disadvantaged and minorities. Parental choice takes on the meaning of equity, as a sense of fairness underlies the offer and selection of a range of educational options, thus contributing to the maintenance of the privileges of the dominant classes.

**Conclusion**

To sum up, the example of Canada is indicative of changing conceptions of youth that occur through societies. It serves to illustrate the power of social norms and mores in constructing childhood.

Conceptions of childhood and youth are social constructs, contingent upon a wide variety of factors and circumstances, cultural traditions and rituals, and historical variations (Hollands, 2001). Many moral, socio-economic, political and legal
influences have shaped these changes. These include the appearance of a more liberal Christianity, the growth of industrial and agricultural productivity, the spread of literacy and the rise of the middle class, the greater emancipation of women, and enlarged notions of citizenship (Strong-Boag, 2002). Two particular processes – the advent of schooling at all levels, and the post-war development of teenage youth culture in advertising and through the media – have been instrumental in extending childhood and shaping youth (Hollands, 2001).

There are two dominant conceptions, an angelic one and a demonising one. One represents children and youth from the perspective of the bourgeois model of family: children and youth are dependent on adults for their basic needs, protected from predatory adults and older children, treated separately from adults, and were not to labour until maturity (Rooke and Schnell, 1983; Strong-Boag, 2002; and Chunn, 2003). The other conception stems from the over-application of the bourgeois model to youthful populations for whom it does not fit and who are blamed for this mismatch individually. Yet beyond these two are the many conceptions of childhood constructed throughout Canada’s story, which become clear in particular economic, cultural and political contexts, particular configurations of power relations, and within particular spatial and temporal boundaries.

The one conception that runs through all of Canada’s historical periods is the notion of children and youth as consumers, i.e., as producers, buyers and commodities. In the colonial periods, children’s labour was a survival strategy of the family, the colonisers and the fur trade. During Confederation and Western expansion into the 1920s, child labour was extensive and its excesses led to child labour laws, further supporting the middle class conception of the child as dependent upon adults and free to play rather than to labour. During the era of progressivism, the child was conceptualised as a scientific inquirer, a liberated thinker and a social actor – the middle-class view of childhood anticipating the later conception of the independent learner. The following period saw the emergence of Charter identities, individual and collective rights including francophone linguistic school rights, and a conscious construction of a society respectful of self and others. The rise of prosperity after the 1950s followed by two recessions in the 1980s and 1990s, once again made explicit the economic and political agendas, underpinning educational reforms.

Educational policy makers and researchers have a responsibility to understand conceptions of children and youth and to recognise the forces that shape them. Young people must be recognised with all their self-creating potential, as whole individuals who, as members of particular socio-political and cultural groupings, are faced with their own issues and challenges (Pacom, 2001). The lives of young people today are diverse and
multifaceted. By virtue of their profession, educators are called upon to see beyond broad social representations of children and youth so as to support their strengths, legitimacy, diversity and vitality. Not all students are alike and one conception of the student/learner/consumer will not fit all. Imposing one through policy and practices will simply increase inequalities.

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