



# New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences



Issue 1 (2017) 468-474

ISSN 2421-8030

[www.prosoc.eu](http://www.prosoc.eu)

Selected paper of 8th World Conference on Educational Sciences (WCES-2016), 4-8, February 2016, University of Alcalá, Madrid, Spain

## The notion of childhood in non-governmental organizations

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### Suggested Citation:

Avci, N & Koran, N. (2017). The notion of childhood in non-governmental organizations. *New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences*. [Online]. 01, pp 468-474. Available from: [www.prosoc.eu](http://www.prosoc.eu)

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Jesus Garcia Laborda, University of Alcalá, Spain

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### Abstract

The aim of this study is to describe the view of childhood in international and national non-governmental organizations that work for the benefit of children. In line with the objective of this study, a comprehensive screening was made through the Google Search Engine using the key words NGO (non-governmental organization), international, national and child, ensuring the collection of relevant data. We identified ten international and four national non-governmental organizations (NGO) working for the benefit of children. The websites of these NGOs were screened, and the information they provided under What We Do, About Us, Mission and Vision sections were saved. The data was then evaluated using the categories of childhood constructions developed by Sorin (2005) and analyzed by means of a content analysis. As a result the websites of international NGOs mainly used the image of the "child as a victim." An evaluation of the data from national NGO's websites revealed that these NGOs generally used the image of the innocent child and the child as a victim.

Keywords: Childhood, view of childhood, non – governmental organizations.

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## 1. Introduction

Childhood is a concept that has long been subjected to differing understandings and assessments from the past to present. The notion that childhood is and should be completely different from adulthood, and that it is not merely a miniature version of adult life, was first introduced to the Western world in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The rapid developments in science and technology that followed the Industrial Revolution triggered an increasing need for a qualified labor force in various sectors, from which emerged the idea of public education. Philippe Ariès, the French historian acknowledged for his pioneering analysis of childhood from the perspective of social history, suggested that the idea of childhood (*sentiment de l'enfance*) did not exist in medieval society, and that the understanding of modern education, with schools based on class and age, played a very decisive role in the modern world's conceptualization of childhood. This shift in education ensured that children were separated from the world of adulthood, after which, childhood was accepted as a different and significant period (Dogan, 2000, quoted by Yurtsever 2009; Elkind, 2001; Postman, 1995).

In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the ideas presented by John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Pestalozzi were influential in changing the perceptions of childhood by underlining that children were not the same as adults, and should be prepared for adulthood by adults (Postman, 1995; Franklin, 2005). During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the transformation in the notion of childhood continued, with growing emphasis on the fact that childhood was a different period in one's life. Children, being perceived as "objects" that could be alienated, abandoned, and even killed, were transforming into "subjects" with certain basic rights and individual natures (Elkind 2001; Archard, 2004; Alderson, 2008; Burke, 2010).

Based on the views and perspectives on childhood in relevant literature, Sorin (2005) developed ten images of childhood, depicting the innocent child, noble/savior child, evil child, snowballing child, out of control child, miniature adult, adult-in-training, child as commodity, child as victim, and agentic child. These ten images developed by Sorin regarding childhood were, as described in the methods section of this manuscript, used as the main coding category of this study. For this reason, the researcher considered it necessary to provide a brief explanation of these childhood images.

- The Innocent Child

The image of the innocent child depicts children as helpless, vulnerable, and dependent blank slates that adults must complement and help develop (Sorin, 2003; as cited by Sorin, 2005).

- The Noble/Savior Child

Just as the image of the innocent child, the noble/savior child is also a somewhat positive image, with the difference that the child is perceived as having the capacity to assume adult responsibilities, such as protecting others from harm and ill-fate.

- The Evil Child

In pre-historic times and in the early Christian era, there was a widespread belief that a child is the "product of sin" within the family (i.e. between mother and father). It was hence believed that children were naturally predisposed to evil from birth, and that severe discipline and corporeal punishment was necessary to ensure they would become mature and responsible adults (Corsaro, 1997, Walkerdine, 1999; as cited by Sorin, 2005).

- The Snowballing Child

Describes an image where the child grows like a snowball when the adult's control or influence decreases. These types of children are perceived as spoiled kids who are never satisfied with what they have and constantly demand more, regardless of the amount of resources made available to them.

- The Out of Control Child

While adults can still exert control over snowballing children, and while evil children can be brought under control through harsh and rigid disciplinary measures; out of control children put adults into a position of helplessness through the violent and self-harming behavior they exhibit in order to force others to do what they want (Robson, 2005; as cited by Sorin, 2005).

- The Miniature Adult

In this image, children are depicted as a miniature version of adults, being similar to adults in every other way. Hence, childhood is not perceived as a separate period from adulthood. However, according to this image, neither the child nor the adults are considered to have a monopoly on actual power.

- The Adult-In-Training

This image depicts childhood as a training and practice period for adulthood.

- The Child as Commodity

Examples of children perceived as a commodity include children photographed in flower pots; children participating in beauty pageants; or children used in child pornography. These children are akin to products for the consumption of an adult audience (Wood, 2003; as cited, 2005).

- The Child as Victim

These children are victims of social and political forces. They have to endure war and terror, abject poverty, and misery. These children are helpless victims who lack any voice or say on their fate. Pictures of these children are often used in shopping malls to gain sympathy or donations, with the children generally being unaware that their photographs are being used.

- The Agentic Child

This image is relatively more recent compared to the others. With the growing popularity of Reggio Emilia's approach, it became accepted by many early childhood instructors, and is implemented in their educational practices. By changing the image of the innocent and helpless child, it helped ensure the active participation of children in matters that directly concern their lives. According to this image, childhood is a process during which the child gives meaning to his/her environment through active participation. Meanwhile, adults act as guides for the children, sharing their "decision-making authority" with the children in the process (Woodrow, 1999; as cited by Sorin, 2005).

The approach of adults to childhood and the perspectives of childhood influence behaviors, practices, and services aimed at children (Kellett, 2013). Adults, as those that provide basic care to children, are also the decision-making authorities that define state policies towards children, the experts who work with children, and members of non-governmental organizations focused on children's issues. The aim of this study is to describe the view of childhood in international and national non-governmental organizations that work for the benefit of children. To this end, the following questions were formulated:

- What types of childhood constructions are reflected in information provided under the What We Do, About Us, and Mission and Vision sections of the relevant NGOs' websites?

- What similarities and differences exist between the childhood constructions that are reflected in the What We Do, About Us, and Mission and Vision sections of the relevant NGO websites?

## 1. Method

For this qualitative study, data was collected through a data analysis, with documents sampled purposefully for analysis (Creswell, 2013). In line with the objective of this study, a comprehensive

screening was made through the Google Search Engine using the key words NGO (non-governmental organization), international, national and child, ensuring the collection of relevant data. We identified ten international and four national non-governmental organizations (NGO) working for the benefit of children. The websites of these NGOs were screened, and the information they provided under What We Do, About Us, Mission and Vision sections were saved. The data was then evaluated using the categories of childhood constructions developed by Sorin (2005), and analyzed by means of a content analysis. Later, all of the data was analyzed by an expert as a peer review (Creswell, 2013). The data acquired by the researcher and expert was analyzed using the reliability formula suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). The reliability score for national NGO web sites is 83%  $(19/19+4*100)$  and for international NGO web sites is 82%  $(28/28+6*100)$ .

## 2. Findings

Data obtained from the websites of international NGOs showed that the noble/savior child, evil child, snowballing child, out of control child, miniature adult, adult-in-training, and child as commodity images were not used by any of them. An evaluation of this data indicated that these NGOs exclusively employed the innocent, the child as victim, and the agentic child images.

**Table 1. The distribution of the childhood images identified in the internet website statements of international NGOs**

International Non-Governmental Organizations	N GOA	N GO B	N GOC	N GOD	N GO E	N GO F	N GO G	N GO H	N GO I	N GO J	TOTAL
Childhood Image											
Innocent Child	2	9	6	2	3	7	4	0	1	0	34
Child as Victim	8	4	13	5	0	5	4	11	9	3	62
Agentic Child	1	0	2	2	0	3	1	3	2	1	15

The websites of international NGOs mainly used the image of the “child as a victim.” This image was reflected through statements such as: *“Our goal is to lift millions of children out of poverty.....has been providing critical assistance to children and families struggling in terrible poverty ...our mission is to bring real and lasting chance to children living in poverty.”*The next most common image used on these websites as that of the innocent child, which was reflected through statements such as: *“We believe that all children have the right to invest their potential and provide them with to opportunity to group up healthy, educated and prepared to succeed...”*Among the websites we examined, the least common type of childhood image was that of the agentic child. This image was reflected on the websites through statements such as: *“policies to fulfill children’s rights and ensure that children’s voices are heard ... We encourage young people to speak out and participate in the decisions that affect their lives .”*The internet websites of international NGOs placed emphasis to a lesser extent on the innocent and agentic child images than on the image of the child as a victim.

**Table 2. Distribution of the childhood images identified in the internet website statements of national NGOs**

National Non-Governmental Organizations	NGO A	NGO B	NGO C	NGO D	TOTAL
Childhood image					
Innocent child	3	6	0	1	10
Child as Victim	7	1	2	0	10
Agentic Child	0	3	0	10	13
Adult-In-Training	0	0	0	4	4

Similar to the websites of international NGOs, national NGOs also did not use the images of the noble/savior child, evil child, snowballing child, out of control child, miniature adult, and child as commodity on their internet sites. However, we determined that in contrast to international NGOs, the websites of national NGOs made use of the image of the adult-in-training.

An evaluation of the childhood images used on the websites of national NGOs revealed that NGO A, NGO B, and NGO D all used the image of the innocent child; NGO C, on the other hand, did not use statements on their website that depicted this image. Examples of statements reflecting the innocent child image included: *“Our agenda and priority is to protect children and to ensure their well-being... We work diligently with utmost dedication to ensure the well-being and development of children.”*

The websites of NGO A, NGO B, and NGO C also included statements that reflected the image of the child as a victim. Such statements were especially found extensively on NGO A’s website. The website of NGO D, on the other hand, lacked any statements depicting the child as a victim image. Examples of statements reflecting the child as a victim image included: *“Our goals is to find and help children who are being forced to beg or to work under harsh conditions by their families... The thanks of children hugging us with their feeble and tired arms is what gives us hope and strength...”*

The websites of NGO B and NGO D also used statements that reflected the image of the agentic child, while the websites of NGO A and NGO C lacked such statements. The image of the agentic child was especially used extensively on NGO D’s website.

Examples of statements reflecting this image included: *“Children are not the ‘subjects’ of our work, but rather our working partners. We work together with children to promote their self-development as individuals... Network activities and participation programs are primarily conducted together with children, who are our main working partners and friends.”*

The image of the adult-in-training was only identified in the statements on NGO D’s website. This image was reflected through statements such as *“Our association focuses on providing out-of-school education support to elementary school children...”* *“The prerequisite of a brighter future and brighter faces is giving the best education to our children...”*

An evaluation of the data from national NGO’s websites revealed that these NGOs generally used the image of the innocent child and the child as a victim. While the image of the agentic child was found on the websites of two NGOs (NGO B and NGO D), only one of them, namely NGO D, used it

extensively. Consequently, it would not be accurate to generalize the number of times the agentic child image is used to the other NGOs. The image of the adult-in-training, on the other hand, was used on the website of only one NGO (NGO D).

### 3. Discussion and Conclusion

Just as childhood is perceived and defined differently by different cultures, the different segments of the same society also tend to have different understandings of childhood (Heywood, 2003). As such, it is expected that non-governmental organizations, which are defined as non-official organizations that provide social services and attempt to influence politics in accordance with their defined objectives (Lewis, 2010), will both influence and be influenced by society's perception of childhood. What is important in this context is to determine the approaches (or images) that are preferred to reflect the prevailing perception of childhood. The image of the child as a victim that is frequently used by non-governmental organizations that focus on children actually leads to negative labeling as well as discriminatory behavior and rhetoric towards children. In society, individuals provide donations and financial support to such non-governmental organizations largely to achieve a form of spiritual or moral relief. Thus, services and support motivated by the image of the child as a victim are driven more by "pity" than by the notion of basic rights. The image of a child as a victim, as the most frequent depiction by non-governmental organizations working for the benefit of children, leads to the labeling of children and their exposure to discriminatory behavioral patterns or discourses. Individuals mostly ensure moral satisfaction through donations to these NGOs. Children as victims are widely perceived as second-hand users of donated clothes or toys of donors or their children.

The information conveyed about children through all media channels, including relevant web sites, rather than addressing issues that involve children, provide rather negative or dramatic depictions of them. Children are represented in the media as passive and silent victims, as people that are exposed to violence or unfortunate accidents or as those who suffer from poor living conditions (Alankus, 2007; UNICEF, 2007; Manzo, 2008). Images of children as victims on websites are thought to strengthen such perceptions of society, while images of innocent children, on the other hand, tend to portray children as a group that is in need of protection. As a result of these depictions of childhood, children are regarded as inferior citizens when compared to adults, and there is a misconception in society that the rights of the child are bestowed by adults. It is believed that the image of the child as a victim further reinforces this social image. Lamers (2005) previously conducted a study analyzing the fund-raising posters used between 1966 and 2001 by non-governmental fund-raising organizations in Belgium, where he noted that the posters generally depicted significant differences between "individuals" and "the others." By "individuals," Lamers meant the donators, while "the others" referred to the children in need of aid and support. Lamers observed that while "individuals" were depicted as well-informed, active and generous adults, "the others" were depicted as uninformed, passive, and helpless children. Tallon (2005) argues that the awareness raising activities of non-governmental organizations are significantly affected by the nature and requirements of fund-raising activities. He claims that while non-governmental organizations are fully capable of depicting children in different ways (i.e. by using different images), they generally choose not to do so out of concern that this might negatively affect their fund-raising activities. Contrary to the depictions of children as passive and silent victims, and the images of innocent children described as seedlings that are something to be protected and nurtured by adults until adulthood, as suggested through the metaphor of "kindergarten" by Froebel (Aries, 1962 Quoted by Postman, 1995), the aim is to boost and attain the image of the agentic child, which revolves around a child's agency in their own lives. In this situation, children's opinions are valued and taken seriously when related to the issues affecting them, in which case they have the same decision making power as adults (Council of Europe, 2004; Lansdown, 2005; UNICEF, 2007; Alderson, 2008). Depicting children based on the image of the agentic child will help strengthen the legal and social status of children, since it will reinforce the view that while children may not have the autonomy of adults, they can be fully aware of the essence and nature of their individual rights.



The agentic child image is important for protecting the “individuality” of children (Franklin, 2005, Johnny,2006), and also help provide children with the same level of decision-making to children as adults. With this image, not only are the views of children given greater importance and attention, but children are, under the guidance of adults, also granted a greater say and decision-making capacity in matters that concern them directly (Sorin, 2005).

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