Module 2: Contemporary Approaches to Childhood

The developing interest in the theology of childhood in the second half of the twentieth century reflects an explosion of interest in and new approaches to the study of childhood in the fields of the humanities and social sciences over that very same period. This module engages with some of the most fertile approaches, particularly in the field of the sociology of childhood, in order to consider their educational implications. The module will also study the sociologically informed approach of renowned early years’ educator, Carla Rinaldi.
Readings and Activities

In Module 2 you will find links to:

- two **required readings** with activities
- three **additional non-required** extension readings

Completing the readings and their related activity will enable you to complete the first Assessment Task: Forum

Learning Outcomes

On successful completion of this module students should be able to:

1. Analyse the major shift in the sociological study of childhood especially since the 1990s, and assess the significance of this shift both for their own educational practice, and for the theology of childhood.
2. Describe the fundamental elements of *Re-Imagining Childhood*’s (Carla Rinaldi) vision of childhood and view of learning, and appraise their own educational practice in that light.

2.1 Sociology of Childhood

The twentieth century has seen important historical studies of childhood, with French cultural historian Philippe Ariès writing the pioneering work, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. Trans. Robert Baldick (London: Vintage, 1962), and British social historian Hugh Cunningham offering a more recent account of the experience of being a child through the ages, in *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* Second ed (London: Routledge, 2005).

Over the last thirty years, a major shift has occurred in the academic study of childhood. The year 1990 forms somewhat of a pivotal point. Since the 90s, the study of childhood has shifted from being primarily approached from the perspective of developmental psychology, to the embrace of a broader set of questions raised by the social sciences, principally sociology. This field has come to be known as “childhood studies,” although it is also called the sociology of childhood.

The current section of Module 2 is concerned with this broader perspective, and the ways in which it enables us to think anew about the children in our classrooms and schools. British sociologists Allison James and Alan Prout (*Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, viii-x) summarize three fundamental features of what they call the “emergent paradigm.”

First, the new sociological approach recognizes that children are agents or actors within their social world—as active in the construction of their own lives. This particular feature shows the influence of major twentieth-century philosophers, including Martin Heidegger, who see human beings as engaged agents rather than passive receptors, or beings with a fixed nature.

Second, the new approach sees childhood as a “permanent feature of the social structure” (viii), and is therefore interconnected with other variables of social analysis such as gender, class, and ethnicity.

Third (and implicit in the first two features and in the historical studies discussed above), is the understanding that childhood finds various social expressions across times and cultures.

**Activity: Emergent Paradigms**
2.1.1 Explore Emergent Paradigms

Purpose:
To explore the emergent paradigm in the sociology of childhood, identifying the challenges it presents to previous conceptions of childhood, and spelling out its implications for educational practice.

Resources


Task


Contribute a post with two parts to Forum 2, found in Module 2 of this Unit’s LEO site:

1. Write a paragraph that summarizes, from your perspective, what Prout and James call the emergent paradigm of childhood, drawing out its strengths and, perhaps, raising what you see as limitations [250 words].
2. In light of your reading for this section of the Module, discuss how this emergent paradigm could best influence your educational practice, either in the classroom or in school leadership, or both [250 words]. How could/should this paradigm influence the educational enterprise? How does it affirm, develop, or critique your earlier theories or assumptions about childhood?

After contributing your own post, respond to one of your classmates’ posts, respecting his or her contribution, and aiming to contribute to the group’s learning [166 words]. You might:

1. Draw attention to something which, from your reading of Prout and James, seems implicit in your classmate’s account and well worth developing;
2. Suggest further aspects of the sociology of childhood, or your own experience, that seem relevant to your classmate’s post; or
3. Raise a question that could lead to further discovery on your classmate’s part.

2.2 Reimagining Childhood
Carla Rinaldi is a world leader in the field of children’s education in the early years. Based in the northern Italian province of Reggio Emilia, she is the President of Reggio Children, and Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. Both a practitioner and a theorist of education, that combination in Rinaldi’s approach is of most interest to us in this Module. She was the South Australian Government’s “Adelaide Thinker in Residence” in 2012-2013, and has a continuing relationship with Catholic Education South Australia, and the Department of Education and Child Development, South Australia.

Central to the Reggio Emilia approach to education is a vision of childhood and a view of learning, referred to as “the image of the child” and “the pedagogy of listening.” In her reflection on childhood, Rinaldi challenges common assumptions that childhood is primarily a period of preparation, and that children are weak and unknowing. She sees children as “strong, powerful and rich in potential and resources, right from the moment of birth”. In this context, Rinaldi writes of children as “citizens.”

Rinaldi’s phrase “the pedagogy of listening” emphasizes that “an active attitude of listening between adults, children and the environment is the premise and context of every educational relationship”. Children bring a world of experience and questions to the learning process, which should begin with that experience and those questions. Here, listening requires us to seek to understand the world on children’s terms—to be open to the variety of ways in which they express themselves. With this in mind, Rinaldi writes of the “hundred languages” of children: “a hundred ways of thinking, of expressing themselves, of understanding and encountering others”.


2 Ibid., 32.

3 Ibid., 20.
Activity: A View of Childhood

2.2.1 Outline and Evaluate Rinaldi's view

Purpose:

To outline the primary elements of Rinaldi’s view of children and childhood, and to evaluate the implications of that view for educational practice.

Resource


Task

Read pages 15-35 of Rinaldi’s Re-Imagining Childhood, and ask yourself:

- What do you see as the fundamental aspects of Rinaldi’s vision of children and childhood? What are the strengths of Rinaldi’s approach? Are there weaknesses and, if so, how would you express those?
- How could Rinaldi’s vision of childhood best influence your educational practice, either in the classroom or in school leadership, or both?
- How could/should this vision of childhood influence the educational enterprise of Catholic Education? How does this vision affirm, develop, or critique your earlier theories or assumptions about childhood?

Journal

JOT A JOURNAL ENTRY:

- Explain, in a few sentences, the theological concepts or truths in this Module section that have caught your attention and given you new insight.
- How do these insights challenge, confirm, or extend your previous understandings or assumptions?
- If you took these new learnings on board, how would they change your self-understanding, your approach to life, or your educational practice?

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