



Childhood intersections

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ABSTRACT

Intersectionality is a term used by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) to explain that black women cannot be represented fully through feminist and antiracist discourse. The term has since been used to show that every person has a multitude of identity facets which interact with each other. Children have been considered as a homogenous group for many decades, yet they need to be considered in light of their race, social class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, age and ethnic background. Education is the key to giving every child equitable opportunities to help in their development, leading them to become more agentic in things which affect them directly.

KEY WORDS

Intersectionality, childhood, activism

INTRODUCTION

In her article, *'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,'* Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) explores how the experiences of black women are not fully represented by discourses of feminism and antiracism, when each category is analysed separately. Feminists in the 1970s felt that mainstream feminism represented white middle-class women and anti-racism represented black men (Crenshaw, 1991). The need for an intersectionality theory had already been felt back in 1851, in Sojourner Truth's speech delivered at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio, *'Ain't I a Woman'*. Crenshaw (1991) mentions the DeGraffenreid v. General Motors 1976 case, in which Emma DeGaffenreid sued General Motors for not hiring her on both gender and racial discrimination grounds. Although the judge ruling the case dismissed it, stating that there were no grounds for such allegations, DeGraffenreid stated that GM only hired women who were white and black people who were men. Crenshaw (1991) coined the word 'intersectionality' to represent those people who are experiencing multiple marginalisations and whose experiences are not represented fully by any particular socially constructed identity (Taefi, 2011). The metaphor of the crossroads (Crenshaw, 1991) is used to conceptualise that we need to see how the different identities interact to create feelings of marginalisation within disadvantaged groups. Alanen (2016) states that through these identities, women form part of different frameworks which can lead to both privilege and oppression.

Alper et al. (2016) and Rodó-de-Zarate (2016) note that intersectionality is the understanding of different connections between race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, age and ethnicity. These are different dimensions of identity which may cause marginalisation and discrimination. Intersectionality is now a term which is used to represent groups who experience multiple oppressions (Williams-Butler et al., 2021) and many scholars have turned their attention towards exploring how it can be applied to childhood (Rodó-de-Zarate, 2016).

CHILDHOOD – COMMONALITIES AND DIVERSITIES

Childhood is commonly defined by age, but it should not suggest homogeneity in the effects of social contexts faced by children in their everyday experiences (Christensen & James, 2008). Commonality and diversity should be characteristics of childhood to be considered as assets for any group that the children might associate with. The particular social context in which one is born, should not be the defining factor of what the future holds for that child (Calder, 2006). Education should be the tool which helps children determine their own future.

Although education is always high priority on the political agenda, it is a global phenomenon (Meadow, 2015) that the educational system should, but does not, give access to equitable opportunities for all children. Education is a tool to provide equity to counter racial discrimination and oppression and it does not suffice to treat every child equally. I.M. Young (1990) states that unequal educational attainment and unequal opportunities will persevere in today's multicultural societies, even if all students have access to education. Giving equal access to education to children will not address all the kinds of injustice that have an effect on students from disadvantaged groups. In *'Crisis in Education'* Arendt (1958) states that teachers need to take responsibility for children and that education should be a safe space for children to transition into adulthood and into the political sphere.

During the 70s and 80s, children were depicted as 'unagentic, blank slates' (Martin, 2005, p. 45). Recent literature on childhood has been considering children as having the ability and the right to become more active (De Graeve, 2015), especially in matters which directly affect them. This shift in perception on childhood can be further developed if childhood is seen in relation to the intersectionalities which affect this stage in life, as discussed in the next section.

CHILDHOOD AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Although intersectionality originated as a feminist term, it has recently been applied to different disadvantaged groups, including children (Taefi, 2011). De Graeve (2015) states that the notion of age needs to be considered in relation to other factors which make up the child's identity. The author quotes Prout and James (1997) who say that childhood needs to be analysed in relation to other categories such as gender, class and ethnicity. Alanen (2016) asserts that in order to effectively understand children's complex social identities we need to explore childhood in relation to gender, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, ethnic origins, race, class and age. Alper et al. (2016) state that intersectionality is a useful tool for studying childhood identities, as a young person can be advantaged for making part of one social group and discriminated against for having other characteristics. For example a child can be admitted to a school for high attainment children, while still feeling 'othered' (Jensen, 2011) by classmates due to the family economic status. Alper et al. (2016) state that intersectionality is important to understand the diversity among children and to find the commonalities which will build a common future (p. 110). Rodó-de-Zarate (2016) states that intersectionality allows research to consider who else children are. Intersectionality gives relevance to children's social differences as affecting their everyday experiences (Rodó-de-Zarate, 2016). To give a visual perspective of how intersectionalities interact with each other, Rodó-de-Zarate (2016) created a tool - Relief Maps. These maps are built on three dimensions: the geographical, the social and the psychological. Relief Maps provide an image, drawn by the researcher, to give a visual representation of the oppression and privilege experienced, due to one's multiple identities. Williams-Butler et al. (2021) use intersectionality to investigate the language used in the American child welfare system which is discriminatory against Black children from low-income families.

Taefi (2011) states that one of the disadvantages in childhood studies is that children are taken to be gender-neutral. Childhood experiences are generally taken as being at par for both girls and boys, making the gender-specific disadvantages less visible (Renold, 2005). Crenshaw (1991) states that we cannot solve a problem if we cannot see the problem. Taefi (2011) points to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Article 2 which states that every child's rights will be protected regardless of their gender, while further on in the document, Article 38 mentions issues which only affect boys, such as military service. Issues which affect girls specifically, such as child marriage and female genital mutilation are not referred to in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). In 2017, UNICEF launched the 'Girls for Girls' initiative to empower girls through education, specifically focusing on girls in Nigeria, which has the highest rate of girls who do not attend school; this initiative aims at teaching girls so that they have better chances for their future. Although there have been advancements in gender identity in recent years, literature is still lacking regarding childhood and gender.

GIRL-CHILD INTERSECTIONALITIES

It is important to dedicate this section specifically to girl children because they are at intersections between being discriminated against for being young and for being female (De Graeve, 2015). Many childhood scholars treat childhood as a homogenous group (De Graeve, 2015; Christensen & James, 2008; Davis, 2008), yet it is important to recognise that gender plays an important role in the kind of experiences children go through (Taefi, 2011). As noted by Taefi (2011), the first question one asks when a child is born, is whether it is a boy or a girl. The child's sex determines how they will be welcomed and treated by different cultures (Taefi, 2011). For example, a common practice in the Volta Region in northern Ghana is Trokosi, whereby girls are offered to a priest to work in sexual servitude to make good for the sins of their family members (Taefi, 2011). Several Islamic countries have reservations against Article 2 in the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), specifying that states need to modify existing laws which discriminate against women, as it conflicts against the Shari'a law (Taefi, 2011).

Girls are born into a world where boy's choices dictate the norm while girl choices are given less value or ignored (Taefi, 2011). Even in cultures where there is 'equality' between the sexes, girls and women are still held back and discouraged in certain situations which are still dominated by men (Dresden, 2016). Taefi (2011) considers girls to be marginalised as children for being girls, and as females for being young. These intersectionalities hinder girls' experiences from being recognised and validated. Taefi (2011) suggests that women's rights and children's rights discourses need to work together to better represent girls' rights in both categories. Apart from age and gender, Taefi (2011) also mentions other forms of discrimination experienced particularly by girls such as homophobia, racism, colonization and poverty (p. 345).

A study by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) revealed that the fact that girls' rights are at intersections between children's rights and women's rights will continue to make girls' marginalisation possible (De Graeve, 2015; Taefi, 2011). De Graeve (2015) notes how women and children patriarchal discourses relegate both groups to the private sphere.

At the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, the issues of the girl-child were discussed. A declaration known as the Beijing Declaration (1995) ensued, becoming one of the first documents to address girls' rights specifically. Some of the objectives include eliminating negative cultural practices against girls and the promotion of girls' rights. To date, many girls around the world are still suffering discrimination and marginalisation due to their gender and age (De Graeve, 2015).

Taefi (2011) suggests that a way forward would be the appointment of a Special Rapporteur for the Girl-Child needs in order to promote and advocate for girls' inclusion in international human rights law. This rapporteur will suggest reforms in existing policies and ensure that the Beijing Declaration (1995) is factualised.

CONCLUSION

Taefi (2011) states that Intersectionality theory is useful for shedding light on girls' positioning in international law. Girls are marginalised both for their gender and their age amongst other facets of their identities. An intersectional analysis takes into account that every form of discrimination or marginalisation does not take place in a vacuum, but in relation to other forms of discrimination. Intersectionality theory helps to make these discriminations visible, so that we can then address them (Crenshaw, 1991).

The Intersectionality Theory has to be applied to the educational system in order to make visible the roots of policies and practices which keep perpetuating the idea of children as homogenous, vulnerable and un-agentic (Wyness et al., 2004). Education needs to go through a great shift in vision to give children an agentic role by teaching them skills to become politically active in things which affect them.

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