

Critically Evaluate the Usefulness and Limitations of the Concept of Agency in Childhood Studies

Ziyan Zhang

Shaanxi Youth Vocational College, Xi'an, Shaanxi, 710100, China

ABSTRACT

Since the emergence of new social studies of childhood in the late 1980s, the definition of children in childhood studies has gradually changed from objects to independent subjects, and children are considered to be agents. Agency is a key term in childhood studies, but it is highly controversial. When researchers focus on the concept of agency in interdisciplinary childhood studies, they need to look for answers from multiple perspectives. Therefore, this article will evaluate the concept of the agency in childhood studies from both the usefulness and the limitations. Firstly, the agency and its concepts in childhood studies will be elaborated. The second is to analyze the usefulness of the concept of agency in childhood studies from the perspective of the right to speak in the social field and the equality between children and adults. Thirdly, the two limitations that children need not be responsible and prevent parents and teachers from effectively managing will be illustrated. The last part will summarize the viewpoints of usefulness and limitations, and put forward the place for further research.

KEYWORDS

Agency; Childhood studies; Children's rights; Intergenerational equality

1 The concept of agency

Both Bordonaro and Payne (2012) believe that the concept of agency has been mentioned by many researchers, but each one defines it in its own way of understanding. So this part will discuss the definition of agency and the concept of agency in childhood studies from multiple perspectives.

1.1 The definition of agency

Agency is a concept often used in the literature. However, so far it does not have a clear terminology (Moran-Ellis and Tisdall2019). For example, in musicology, agent refers to the person who manages the artist's working life; in housing management, agency means the middleman between the buyer and the seller; and in the field of childhood studies involved in this essay, it generally describes a person's ability to make his own opinions recognized after participating in decision-making (Wyness, 2018). Therefore, the association between the concept of agency and childhood studies is what childhood researchers expect to explore.

1.2 The concept of agency in Childhood Studies

Although agency is still a vague theory, Bordonaro and Payne (2012) discuss that the concept of agency plays an important role in redefining interdisciplinary childhood studies. Punch(2016) and Gallagher(2019) in effect argue that children's agency as their ability to control their own lives and advocate detailed research on children's agency, such as exploring the nature and classification of agency. In the past, children were considered unable to exercise agency, while adults gained much attention. However, nowadays children have become collaborators and subjects of research(Wyness, 2018).

There are two main properties of agency. On the one hand, Abebe (2019) explains that agency is universal, because every child has the right to exercise it. However, it is questionable whether children are truly involved in activities or symbolically for the sake of so-called diversity. On the other hand, Esser (2016) and Punch(2016) state that agency is continuous and it changes over time. The reason is that not only will it change the current situation of children, but also affect their future.

As for the classification of agency, it is mainly divided into two aspects. Firstly, agency can be distinguished as "thin" agency and "thick" agency (Punch,2016;Holloway,Holt and Mills,2019).In day-to-day decisions and actions, "thin" agency refers to a context where conditions are limited, while "thick" agency has a wide range of options. The other is that agency has individual agency and relation agency (Wyness, 2018). Individual agency is a kind of modernist ideas located in society structures, in contrast to the relational agency. However, relational agency is the product of a child's relationship with others, such as peer relationships and teacher-student relationships.

It can be seen above that the concept of agency is inextricably linked to childhood studies. In addition to the positive impact mentioned above, Tatlow-Golden and Montgomery (2020) note that there are also negative aspects between children and childhood studies. Thereby, the next section is going to discuss the usefulness and limitations of the concept of agency in childhood studies in detail.

2 The usefulness of the concept of agency in Childhood Studies

Esser (2016) states that agency is active when the research focuses on childhood understanding. The concept of agency has also brought many benefits to the development of childhood studies.

2.1 Make Childhood Studies more powerful in the social field

The first usefulness of the concept of agency is to promote the development of childhood studies in the social sphere. Because the concept of children's agency can improve social progress, which gives the subject childhood studies a greater voice in the social sphere and thus develops well. The next two paragraphs will specify the contribution that the concept of children's agency provides for social progress.

First of all, based on the concern for the concept of agency, Bordonaro and Payne (2012) claim that children are active social actors. The association between children and socialization, especially the relational agency, needs to be explored from a relationship perspective. For instance, Nieto(2020) found that Mexican newsboys have great marketing skills, and that homeless children have changed their lives through newspaper trafficking, defended their rights, and even promoted local labor benefits. This case has shown that when children are under social pressure, they can inspire their ability to protect themselves, successfully challenge oppressive situations, and further promote the development of social policies (Holloway, Holt and Mills, 2019). However, it is worth noting that the agency of the newsboy may be forced to happen. Although they have created value for themselves and the society, they must also find out whether the psychological or other negative impacts on the children will be caused by being forced to develop an agency.

The second is the concept of agency, especially interdependence agency enable conflict-prone families to coexist peacefully, thus laying the foundation for the harmonious development of society as a whole. As an illustration, Abebe (2019) discusses that conscious socialization strategies for parenting in West Africa. When family conditions are limited, children use child labor to help maintain the family's livelihood, and when they are short of money, the family will provide financial assistance. As the family's economic situation changes, children use a thin agency or a thick agency. Whether the family is rich or poor, children or adults will make money through their own efforts to ensure the daily life of the family. This kind of unity atmosphere in which the whole family helps each other also avoids social retaliation caused by lack of money and brings help to social stability.

In general, children's agency is a kind of ability generated by children and people around them, and it has an important impact on children's lives and the society in which they live (Gallagher, 2019). Whether in a large social context or in a small family environment, the concept of children's agency can be beneficial to the development of society. According to Esser (2016), society and agency are complementary. Accordingly, when the concept of children's agency is emphasized, it will be found that society is moving in a good direction. In the end, the concept of agency has gained a strong voice in the social field for childhood studies and further promotes its development.

2.2 Make the relationship between children and adults more equal in Childhood Studies

The concept of agency not only helps the development of childhood studies in social field, but also supports the development of the internal relationship of childhood studies. It challenges the traditional framework of domination and understands childhood in a less dichotomy way, making children and adults have the same rights and equal relationship in childhood studies.

Sutterlüty and Tisdall (2019) propose that the agency perspective should not only pay attention to the opinions or ideas of adults, but also listen to the "voices" of children and recognize the rights of children. The dichotomy completely separates children from adults, ignoring the uniqueness of children, but the concept of agency restores the reality of children's lives and provides a platform for children to speak out. In one instance, Esser(2016) did not have children live directly on a schedule set by adults in a family study. Instead, children can suggest areas where they are unhappy with the schedule, and then social educators will have targeted improvement activities. Through the use of their agency, the children expressed their true inner needs, and finally their ideas were met. In this case, the children are no longer seen as growing individuals, but with personal qualities like adults. This breaks the clear boundary between children and adults in the dichotomy, and begins to focus on the "voices" of children, making children and adults an equal relationship and enjoy equal rights(Punch,2016). On the contrary, Morrison et al. (2019) emphasis that children's agency may be limited due to their vulnerability. For example, Rachel, the kid who no longer wants to go home after running away, had to come home again because she needed someone to take care of her. In this case, vulnerability has become a stumbling block to children's agency (Punch, 2016; Gallagher,2019; Abebe,2019; Sultan and Andresen,2019).

In addition to the concern for children's rights mentioned above, there is also support from all walks of life for the concept of agency. These supports enable children to have a strong backing in agency practice, so that they can have an equal relationship with adults. For example, Bordonaro and Payne (2012) mention the international NGO's plan to integrate children's rights into life. Punch (2016) point out that in the 1990s and early 2000s, the new paradigm focused on children's lives to eliminate past prejudices. Holloway, Holt and Mills (2019) discuss the deficiencies of the past from the political aspect, and then improve the rights of children. These examples all prove that the concept of children's agency has gained more and more attention, and children have gradually received more attention. Thus, the rights and

status of children in childhood studies can be equal to that of adults. At the same time, we must also pay attention to the disadvantages of the transfer of power from adults to children (Franklin, 1997, cited in Wyness, 2012). If children have more power than adults, will there be more problems? Because it is very difficult to achieve complete equality between children and adults.

3 The limitations of the concept of agency in Childhood Studies

Agency is a contradictory concept, and it should not be taken for granted that it is only positive or negative (Tisdall and Punch, 2012, cited in Morrison et al., 2019; Punch, 2016). Therefore, Gallagher(2019) and Sutterlüty and Tisdall(2019) believe that it is necessary to think critically about the concept of agency, since the concept of agency has its shortcomings in many aspects. The usefulness of the concept of agency in childhood studies has been discussed above, and then the limitations of the concept of agency in childhood studies will be analyzed from two aspects: irresponsibility of children and effective management of parents and teachers.

3.1 Be the umbrella of children's irresponsibility

Holloway, Holt and Mills (2019) advocate that the concept of agency gives children and young people more autonomy, but it also brings some limitations to the development of childhood studies. Because when children make mistakes, the concept of agency may become a reason for them to evade responsibility, which is not conducive to children and youth becoming better social actors. As an illustration, the tactics of child soldiers, who are both victims and criminals in war (Rosen,2007,cited in Punch,2016). The reason is that they are in a vulnerable position, violence is just a way of coping, but they do cause harm to others, even death. Hence, many times child soldiers are not considered responsible, because they may only be considered to be exercising a right under the concept of agency. Whereas in war, even adults are not always responsible for violence, especially the war caused by the struggle for sovereignty, and the victors of violence tend to be the new masters of the region. Bordonaro and Payne (2012) note that the children and young people of Morocco touch the integrity of European borders when they migrate illegally to southern Europe, but they have a right to be protected, which means that they may not be held accountable. From my point of view, what Bordonaro and Payne's think is more compelling than Punch's example. This is just as article 40 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states that children who have violated the law have the right to receive assistance, and countries must establish a special system for children to ensure that they can become members of society again. However, if an adult behaves in a similar way, they will be held fully legally responsible for what they have done. Thus, the agency concept allows children to be exempted from punishment or less punishment in the event of wrongdoing or even in violation of the law. But it is questionable that children are not necessarily helpless or passive when they are in difficult situations (Punch, 2016). Do they really not know it is wrong when they commit acts of theft, violence, fighting, etc.?Bordonaro and Payne (2012) also mention re-education of children who have committed offences so that they can correct their behaviour and become responsible. What if children behave similarly after correcting mistakes? Can children and young people still rely on the concept of agency to escape responsibility? Or is there another policy? This is worthy of further study by researchers, the relevant departments can also make more complete laws to solve these problems. But overall, the current concept of agency has often become an umbrella for children and young people to shirk their responsibilities, preventing them from becoming active agents.

3.2 Become a reason to hinder the effective management of parents and teachers

The second limitation of the concept of agency in childhood studies is that it hinders the effective management of children by parents and teachers. Although Gallagher (2019) and Morrison et al. (2019) support the idea that researchers in new childhood studies are shifting their perspective from adult to child, but Edmonds (2019) suggests that overemphasizing children's agency can lead to neglect of parents' positive roles. In other terms, when children exercise agency, they develop a sense of self-efficacy, overestimating their strength and thinking they can easily accomplish a lot of things (Gurdal and Sorbring, 2018). For instance, children think that they can run as fast as their father and are as agile as their mother. Children therefore reject parental management or help on the grounds of the concept of agency. Edmonds (2019) gives an example of an early sexual relationship between a Rwandan girl and a boy to prove fertility. If the girl is not given enough agency, however the parents have an effective discipline on her in advance, perhaps she will choose a more scientific and rational way to prove her fertility. This shows that children and young people's brains have not yet been fully developed, compared with mature adults, children lack more accurate judgment of things. If parents do not have adequate and effective guidance on the way to their child's development, then the child may go astray on some important things, which can ultimately have a negative impact on the child's body and mind thus limit the development of childhood studies.

Apart from the effective management of parents, teacher education also plays a vital role. Agency is the product of relationships, the concept of children's agency needs to be perceived in different contexts. Gurdal and sorbring (2018) explain that home and school are the two places that children experience the most every day. However, as the concept of children's agency becomes more and more important, teacher autonomy in kindergartens begins to be threatened or

even disappeared altogether (Ishimaru and Takahashi, 2017). For example, Gurdal and Sorbring (2018) think that children can persuade and try to control the situation when they disagree with their teachers. This is because the concept of children's agency is widely supported, children can express their views for this reason. At this time, too much interference by teachers may be understood as not recognizing the concept of children's agency. Thus, the concept of agency has become a stumbling block for teachers to carry out teaching activities in schools.

General speaking, the concept of children's agency interacts with the management of parents and teachers. Wyness (2012) points out that adults are more likely than children to safeguard children's rights, especially in the political field. When children's agency becomes more and more important, the management of adults will be limited, which is not conducive to the development of childhood studies. However, it is noteworthy that sometimes children do succeed where adults can not help (Prošić-Santovac and Radović, 2018). Hence, this argument is that the concept of agency limits the effective management of parents and teachers in childhood studies, which is not necessarily a limitation for those ineffective management.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper is based on the concept of agency, especially the understanding in childhood studies, and analyzes the usefulness and limitations of the concept of agency in childhood studies. The reason is that children play an important role in the new social studies of childhood, so the impact of children's agency on the development of childhood studies is worth studying. According to the research of many scholars and my thinking, the concept of agency has both advantages and disadvantages for the development of childhood studies. To be more specific, the paper mentioned the use of agency makes the relationship between children and adults more equal, but excessive attention to the agency of children will lead to threats to the management of children by adults. Therefore, it is imperative to provide a healthy development environment for the concept of children's agency and to balance the rights of children and adults. It is unfortunate that this is also a shortcoming in the research of this article, and other researcher can study these aspects in depth in the future. Although the concept of agency currently has some drawbacks, I believe it will bring more diversified help to the development of childhood studies in a more positive environment.

References

- [1] Abebe T. 2019. Reconceptualising Children's Agency as Continuum and Interdependence. *Social Sciences*, 8(3), p.81.
- [2] Bordonaro L. and Payne R. 2012. Ambiguous agency: critical perspectives on social interventions with children and youth in Africa. *Children's Geographies*, 10(4), pp.365-372.
- [3] Esser F. 2016. Neither 'Thick' nor 'Thin': Reconceptualising agency and childhood relationally. In: Esser, F., Baader, M.S., Betz, T. and Hungerland, B. eds. *Reconceptualising agency and childhood: New perspectives in childhood studies*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp.58-70.
- [4] Edmonds R. 2019. Making children's 'agency' visible: Towards the localisation of a concept in theory and practice. *Global Studies of Childhood*, 9(3), pp.200-211.
- Gallagher M. 2019. Rethinking children's agency: Power, assemblages, freedom and materiality. *Global Studies of Childhood*, 9(3), pp.188-199.
- [5] Gurdal S. and Sorbring E. 2018. Children's agency in parent – child, teacher – pupil and peer relationship contexts. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being*, 13(sup1), p.1565239.
- [6] Holloway S., Holt L. and Mills S. 2019. Questions of agency: Capacity, subjectivity, spatiality and temporality. *Progress in Human Geography*, 43(3), pp.458-477.
- [7] Ishimaru A. and Takahashi S. 2017. Disrupting Racialized Institutional Scripts: Toward Parent–Teacher Transformative Agency for Educational Justice. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 92(3), pp.343-362.
- [8] Morrison F., Cree V., Ruch G., Winter K., Hadfield M. and Hallett S. 2018. Containment: Exploring the concept of agency in children's statutory encounters with social workers. *Childhood*, 26(1), pp.98-112.
- [9] Moran-Ellis, J. Tisdall, E. 2019. The relevance of 'competence' for enhancing or limiting children's participation: Unpicking conceptual confusion. *Global Studies of Childhood*, 9(3), pp.212-223.
- [10] Nieto C. 2020. Newsboys in the Streets: Social Reform and Childhood in Mexico City During the Late Porfiriato, 1884–1910. *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 13(3), pp.384-406.
- [11] Prošić-Santovac, D. Radović, D. 2018. Children's vs. teachers' and parents' agency: a case of a Serbian-English bilingual preschool model. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 31(3), pp.289-302.
- [12] Punch S. 2016. Exploring Children's Agency across Majority and Minority World Contexts. In: Esser, F., Baader M., Betz, T. and Hungerland, B. eds. *Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood: New Perspectives in Childhood Studies*. London: Routledge, pp.183-196.
- [13] Sultan A. and Andresen S. 2019. 'A child on drugs': Conceptualising childhood experiences of agency and vulnerability. *Global Studies of Childhood*, 9(3), pp.224-234.
- [14] Sutterlüty, F. Tisdall, E. 2019. Agency, autonomy and self-determination: Questioning key concepts of childhood studies. *Global Studies of Childhood*, 9(3), pp.183-187.
- [15] Tatlow-Golden, M. Montgomery, H. 2020. Childhood Studies and child psychology: Disciplines in dialogue?. *Children & Society*, 35(1), pp.3-17.
- [16] United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. 1989. [online]. 1577 UNTS 3, opened for signature 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990. [Accessed 26 November 2021]. Available from: <https://downloads.unicef.org.uk/>.
- [17] Wyness M. 2012. Children's participation and intergenerational dialogue: Bringing adults back into the analysis. *Childhood*, 20(4), pp.429-442.
- [18] Wyness M. 2018. Agency. In: Wyness, M. *Childhood, Culture and Society In a Global Context*. London: SAGE, pp.126-138.