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# CHILDHOOD CONSTRUCTION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

In 2012 Steven Mintz argued that the history of childhood matters, since it has context-specific implications. This paper outlines the historical construction of childhood, in general, and specifically in Ghana, and presents how childhood construction impacts on children's participation in Ghana. The paper argues that the cultural value underpinning childhood construction in the Ghanaian context - i.e. unidirectional respect from children and young people to adults at all times - has implications for children's participation, as it limits children and young people's willingness to participate in decision-making forums. The paper concludes that by such cultural ideology any participatory effort that includes children, young people and adults together may be counter-productive and thus likely to fail.

*Keywords*: Childhood, Ghana, Children's Participation, Young People

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There are many ideas about childhood in past societies. Nonetheless, prior to the 1970s very little had been written about childhood (Hendrick, 1992), and even the few writings were mainly concerned with whether or not such a concept existed at all i.e. whether there was a recognition that children were different from adults. Ariès (1962) is highly credited for providing the starting point for understanding childhood as both a historical and social construct. Ariès (1962) had stated that "in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist...that it was not until the late seventeenth century that the concept of childhood began to emerge." (Ariès, 1962:125). On the evidence of artistic representations of children, literary texts, manuals, and children's style of dress Ariès argued that the medieval thought of children as simply "little adults". He revealed that in medieval times children entered into the adult world at the age of about seven and that they were not perceived to be different from anyone else. Thus suggesting that the status of a person in the medieval period was not determined by age or physical maturation, but by a person's ability to contribute to the production or mingle with adults (Boakye-Boaten, 2010). In the view of Johnny (2006) although children were immersed into the workforce at a young age, it should not be taken to mean adults did not recognize the distinct nature of children. According to her, it does show that "children were believed to have the ability to participate in the adult world." (Johnny, 2006:21). Ariès continued that adults began to see children as a source of 'amusement and

relaxation' in the sixteenth century, and that by the seventeenth century children began to occupy a separate space from that of adults.

Ariès' claim has been a matter of scholarly controversy over the years. He has found scholars who support his claim as well as those who deny his claim. Shahar (1993) agrees with Ariès that children from an early age were not cut off adult society, stressing that living conditions in medieval houses gave little opportunity for privacy, whether for adults or for children, and that in the outside world children were immediately part of a society in which the ages mixed, but also stresses her disagreement with Ariès' claim that childhood did not exist in medieval times. She argued that medievals rather saw children as being less developed in their mental and moral capacities than adults (Shahar, 1990). Shahar's argument about privacy is, however rejected by Hanawalt (1986:44) who argues that "there was greater privacy in medieval houses than scholars imply, and that there was also almost an obsession with securing privacy." Shavit (1989) also supports Ariès' thesis noting that before the seventeenth century a child was not given a distinct recognition since there were no separate schools established or books specifically written for children. She further argues that the early marriage of people meant that they left childhood at a tender age and joined the workforce.

Farson (1974) also concurs with Ariès' claim that the concept of childhood is exclusively modern. According to him, the modern family had become intolerant and oppressive to children, unlike their counterparts in the middle ages who embraced children without any distinction. These authors sought to understand the particularity of the present childhood by comparing and contrasting it with the past. To them past societies were more nurturing to children while present societies are oppressive to children, which they attribute to changes in practices toward children.

Contributing to the discourse on the discovery or invention of childhood, Postman (1982) agrees with Ariès that childhood is a modern phenomenon, but attributes its rise to technological change but not a moralization of society as stated by Ariès. According to Postman (1982) childhood evolved between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries as a consequence of the invention of the printing press. He argued that the printing press allowed the dissemination of written words and therefore the need to learn to read. Adults who had learned to read took charge of regulating children's reading, and made demands on children to learn to read. Accordingly, this process was institutionalized through mass schooling (Wyness, 2006). Johnny (2006) adds that mass schooling created a separate space for children while providing them opportunities to develop their cognitive abilities, but also imposed a vision of childhood purity and innocence upon children. For Ariès the change in the idea that schooling set for only children rather than for people of all ages the stage for the separation of childhood and adulthood. Moreover, as schooling spread and became extended, childhood lasted longer (Cunningham, 2005).

Other writers in the 1970s about childhood as a social condition included: Lloyd deMause (1974), *The History of Childhood*; Edward Shorter (1976), *The Making of the Modern Family*; and Lawrence Stone (1977), *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500 – 1800*. DeMause's book centers on parent-child relationships as a factor in history. He argued that the central force that changed history is neither technology nor economics, but by what he called 'psychogenic' changes in personality occurring because of successive generations of parent-child interactions. He noted three ways in which such interactions took place, viz: *projective reaction* – adults use children as a vehicle for the projection of their own unconscious, i.e. children become the repository of all the adults' unacknowledged bad feelings and fears about themselves (Cunningham, 2005). *Reversal reaction* - adults use children as a substitute for an adult figure important in their own childhood i.e. the parent becomes a child, and the child becomes a parent. Cunningham (2005) notes that in this

interaction parents look for love from their children. *Empathic reaction* – adults empathize with children's needs and attempt to satisfy them.

For deMause (1974), the key to successful parenting is the ability of the parent to regress to the psychic age of the child, and he believed that each generation of parents were better at doing this than their predecessors. He categorized parent-child relations into six modes namely:

a) the infanticidal mode – when parents resolve their anxieties about caring for their children by killing them;
b) the abandonment mode – when parents began having pity on children but still did not want to care for them, therefore abandoned them at wet nurses or monasteries;
c) the ambivalent mode – when children were kept at home but with little or no emotional connection to their parents;
d) the intrusive mode – when parents became interested in children but the interest was to control the child's behavior and subdue its will;
e) the socialization mode – when parents began to train and guide children into proper paths; and
f) the helping mode – when parents acknowledged that the child knows better than the parent what it needs at each stage of its life, empathized with and fulfilled children's expanding needs.

In short, deMause emphasizes that parent-child relations steadily got better, stating that "the history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken. The further back one goes, the lower the level of child care, and the more likely children are to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorised, and sexually abused." (deMause, 1974:1). De Mause's work has also become a matter of scholarly controversy. His work has been found wanting or supported by other historians who have assessed it using empirical historical evidence. But it is beyond the scope of this paper to present such arguments[1].

Edward Shorter's (1976) book, *The Making of the Modern Family* concentrated on mother-baby relationships. He claimed that 'good mothering' was an invention of modernization, especially capitalism. He too, like Ariès compared the past with the present. He noted that in traditional society, mothers viewed the development and happiness of infants with indifference (similar to deMause's ambivalent mode), whilst in the modern society mothers, places the welfare of their small children above everything else. According to Shorter, mothers ignored their babies' cries, treated them roughly and constricted their movements through swaddling and gave their children to wet nurses. The net result was children's early death, with mothers often resigned to their children's squalling, usually fatal convulsions and fevers (Wyness, 2006). Wyness equates this maternal indifference to modern-day notions of abuse and neglect.

Shorter (1976) agrees with Ariès that the contemporary family was a recent phenomenon. He, however disagrees with Ariès on its chronology. Whereas Ariès believes the seventeenth century marked the turning point, Shorter is of the view that the late eighteenth century marked the transition. Shorter holds capitalism culpable for breaking up traditional society, stressing that as family incomes improved, women could exchange the "grim pressures of production for the work of infant care, and thus begun to take very good care of children at home." (Shorter, 1976:30). Shorter documents this change from about the middle of the eighteenth century among affluent members of society when child rearing practices changed: wet-nurses began to lose their appeal as women attached themselves more

[1] For details of the controversies on de Mause's work see Davis, G (1976) Childhood and History in America. New York. Psychohistory Press. Langer, W (1974) 'Infanticide: a Historical survey' in History of Childhood Quarterly, Vol 1. Shore, M (1979) 'The Psychogenic Theory of History' in Journal of Interdisciplinary History. Vol 9 issue 5. Demos, J (1986) Past, Present and Personal: The Family and the Life Course in American History. Oxford University Press.

to their babies through breastfeeding. These changes and practices trickled to the working classes, and women over time learned to be 'good mothers' and in the process became aware of children as separate entities in need of love, protection and separate treatment.

In sum, Ariès and the other 1970s writers, described by Rosenthal (2007) as the evolutionary school of childhood, believed that there had been changes in attitudes to children and treatment of childhood over the centuries. They, however disagreed on the reasons for the changes and the timing of those changes. As already stated there are other writers who deny Ariès' thesis and the conclusions of the other 1970s writers. Over the years, numerous scholars have made a comprehensive critique of them. It is argued that the writings of the 1970s, writers were "methodologically unsound, technically incompetent, and their conclusions wholly mistaken." (Cunningham, 2005:12). Indeed Rosenthal (2007:1) comments "the world of historical was so excited by Ariès' *Centuries of Childhood* that we were blind to its many faults, errors, and shortcomings. We were seduced, and proved susceptible to the blandishments of what we eventually came to realize were those of a false prophet."

Anderson (1980, cited in Cunningham, 2005) also groups Ariès, Stone, de Mause, and Shorter together as 'the sentiments approach' and criticized them for a style of writing in which speculation or even pure fantasy is glossed over as if it were clearly established fact, and stressed that their method encouraged too much decontextualization in the sphere of culture, without close examination of economic structures. On the issue of decontextualization, Houlbrooke (1984) concurs with Anderson, accusing Ariès of ignoring or dismissing as irrelevant much medieval evidence of solicitude for children, and also for repeatedly ripping evidence from its proper context.

Ariès has also been criticized for his use of arts as evidence for his thesis. Cunningham (1995) argues that different artistic representations of children throughout the centuries merely demonstrated changes in art and not the way in which childhood was perceived. This is supported by Archard (1993), who notes that Ariès' 'iconographic' argument presumes that art is straightforwardly realistic in its representation of social facts. According to him Ariès ignored the extent to which the changes in paintings were due to general developments in arts rather than simply altered attitudes to the subjects of the pictures. Also artwork is said to have the capacity to create rather than simply reflect social reality (O'Brien, 2003). Archard (1993) further criticizes Ariès for what he called *presentism,* i.e. the predisposition to interpret the past in the light of present day attitudes, assumptions and concerns. This criticism can also be extended to the other evolutionary scholars. Indeed, deMause asked "did parents always act much the same as they do today? Did they love and care for their children in similar ways?" (deMause, 1974:iii).

Archard (1993) highlights that from the standpoint of twentieth century, which understood the difference between children and adults in a specific manner, Ariès judged that the past lacked a concept of childhood. Archard is however of the view that what the past societies lacked was in fact the modern societies' concept of childhood. In other words previous societies did not fail to think of children as different from adults but they merely thought about the difference in different ways from what is known today.

Moreover, Ariès and the other 1970s writers' claim that children were not separated from adults until the mid-seventeenth century has been disputed by Montgomery (2009) who points out that the legal system before sixteenth century set age for criminal responsibility, indicating that children were considered morally unaware and different from adults. Shahar (1990) also provides accounts of situations where children were not prosecuted for some crimes including murder because it was deemed accidental since children were believed to be incapable of conceiving an idea to commit murder.

While Ariès may have somehow been undermined, he remains the most important figure in the history of childhood because he set the ball rolling for discussions on the

condition. As to whether childhood existed or not in medieval times, it is now widely acknowledged that children were perceived differently from how they are perceived in the twentieth century and beyond.

## 2. DISCUSSIONS

### *2.1 Childhood from the twentieth century and beyond*

As evident from the above discussions, the dominant image of childhood from the seventeenth century sought to provide children with greater protection from the difficulties and harshness of adult life in particular from factory work. However, Johnny (2006) notes that with the rise of feminism and other movements in the twentieth century the institution of childhood was questioned. In the 1960s feminists argued that the subordinate role ascribed to women was not a true reflection of women's nature, but rather the result of patriarchal domination. They debunked the notion that women were dependent, weak and emotional reiterating that these were social constructs used to justify women's oppression.

Juxtaposing the feminists' argument against children, the child liberation movement was established. Child liberationists such as John Holt (*Birthrights, 1974*), Shulamith Firestone (*The Dialectic of Sex, 1970*), Howard Cohen (*Equal Rights for Children, 1980*), Ann Palmeri (*Childhood's End: Toward a Liberation of Children, 1980*) and Daniel Farson (*Escape from Childhood, 1974*), argued that the helpless and vulnerable image ascribed to children was not indicative of children's true nature and capability. Firestone (1970) called for the inclusion of the oppression of children in any program of feminist revolution. The main claim of the liberationists was that the separation of children and adults worlds was "unwarranted and oppressive discrimination." (cited in Archard, 1993:46).

Holt (1974) considered this unwarranted and oppressive discrimination to be somewhat of a self-confirming ideology. He used the example of a Japanese musician who taught young children to proficiently play the violin, and he compared that with American children who only mimicked rhythm played for them by their teacher. He noted that while Americans were greatly amused by the dexterity of the young Japanese children, they (the Japanese children) were not considered prodigies in Japan. Holt (1974) further argued that children often have the desire to escape from the institution of childhood. He noted that while childhood was often viewed as a protective garden, he was of the view that many children did not experience this protective garden but as a prison from which they wanted to escape. He saw the traditional view of childhood to be oppressive as it denied children opportunities to develop their capacities or exercise autonomy. Therefore he proposed that the rights, privileges, duties, responsibilities of adult citizens be made available to any young person, of whatever age, who wants to make use of them.

Child liberationists further argued that to enable children to emancipate themselves from the oppressive institution of childhood, children should be offered welfare rights and agency rights such as the right to vote and work (Johnny, 2006). They contended that while *agency rights* would require an ability to make rational choices, and acknowledged that not all children possess this capacity, they maintain that the same could be said of adults. They also advocated that children as members of a society should be able to shape and influence how that society is organized, therefore children should have their voices considered equally in the formulation of policies (Dwyer, 1998, cited in Johnny, 2006). Although the arguments of child liberationists have not been fully adhered to, at the international level there has been steady progress at granting *agency* rights to children. One such progress is the adoption of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child.

### *2.2 Childhood in Ghanaian context.*

Ghana is a multi-ethnic society; however values and child rearing practices seldom show variations among the different ethnic groupings. Having a child is a defining characteristic of most Ghanaian families, as children are symbols of status, respect and completeness of the nuclear family (Sossou and Yogtiba, 2008). Accordingly Ike and Twumasi-Ankrah (1999 in Sossou and Yogtiba, 2008) note that, a child is the most treasured subject and constitutes the focal point in life in the Ghanaian traditional value system. Hence some Ghanaians view life without a child as meaningless and would do anything to have a child, even if it means marrying more women or having a child out of wedlock (in the case of men) or consulting traditional healers, priests and other deities to facilitate the process of having a child (in the case of women). In the above scenario, one can see gender disparity in the attempt to have a child. Whereas the men can marry women or shamelessly have a child out of wedlock if it is the wife's 'fault' that they cannot have a child, the women cannot do the same if it is the husband's 'fault'. Having a child is a source of pride and status symbol for Ghanaian men, therefore a marriage without child(ren) stands on a very shaky ground.
Childhood and child-rearing practices in Ghana cannot be well understood without reference to the lineage (descent) system. Lineage determines which household a child spends his childhood, and how inheritance is allocated.

There are two prominent lineage systems in Ghana: patrilineal and matrilineal. Patrilineal societies trace descent through males, while matrilineal societies do so through females. When couples have children, in the matrilineal system, the children trace their descent through the mother. Both sexes of children belong to the matriclan but only female links determine future generations of the matriclan. Therefore women have high status in matrilineal societies. With regards to inheritance, in matrilineal societies children can only inherit from their maternal side. Hence a child cannot directly inherit his or her father in matrilineal societies but can contest for inheritance from his or her maternal uncles.

Conversely, in patrilineal societies children can directly inherit their father. In this vein, matrilineal societies place higher premium on maternal uncles than fathers, and it is very common for children to be 'fostered' by their maternal uncles. Maternal uncles also play the leading role in contracting marriage when the child comes of age and is ready for marriage. This does not however mean that in matrilineal societies fathers are less interested or unloving towards their children. The system of descent and inheritance is very confusing for children born to couples from different lineage systems. A child born to the mother from a matrilineal system and a father from a patrilineal system has dual-lineage and can inherit both parents' families. On the contrary, a child born to the father from a matrilineal system and a mother from a patrilineal system does not belong to any lineage and cannot inherit from any parent's families. Due to this disadvantage the intestate succession law was passed in 1985 to give greater recognition to children upon the death a parent, irrespective of lineage system. The implication of the lineage system in terms of children's participation is that boys are more likely to be involved in family decisions in the patrilineal system, while girls are more likely to be involved in the matrilineal system.

When children are born, it becomes the responsibility of the parents, extended family members and the entire community members to bring up children both in matrilineal and patrilineal descent systems. There exist distinct roles and responsibilities among the male and female members. Females are responsible for household chores while males are responsible for other 'heavy' chores such farming and hunting or fishing. Social patterns are developed around "communal and organic philosophy for protection and survival." (Boakye-Boaten, 2010:108). Citing Valentine and Revson (1979) Boakye-Boaten argues that traditional Ghanaian society is "tightly organized, communal in nature, with kinship systems in extended families whose members made up a network of relationships that carried benefits and obligations to each other." (Boakye-Boaten, 2010:108). Through tales and myths, the elders teach children the moral, ethical codes of behaviour and social relationship. Children

are perceived as human beings in need of guidance, direction and assistance. Boakye-Boaten (2010) notes that children are trained to perpetuate the existence of their family. It is expected that the child will grow, marry and also bear children, hence according to Sarpong (1974:69) "barrenness is the greatest calamity that can befall a Ghanaian woman." This accounts for one of the reasons why most Ghanaians will literally do anything to have a child.

Cultural values guide the relationship between children and their parents in the Ghanaian context. Children are socialized to acquire the cultural mores of the society; with respect for parents and other elders as the linchpin of socialization in Ghana. Children communicate with their parents and any adult in the family and in the community with the utmost respect and dignity - a value that is reaffirmed by the African Children's Charter. Parents and other older members of the community participate in the socialization of children in all spheres of life. Respect for parents and other elders as the linchpin of socialization in Ghana has implications for children's participation. It is worth noting the contradiction that exists in Ghana regarding how childhood construction affects participation; children from about 8 years are perceived as matured and capable of participating in household chores including care of younger siblings and other minor economic activities in the private sphere, but are considered immature and incapable of contributing to decision-making in the public sphere.

*2.3 Children's participation in Ghana*

Culturally required behaviour (i.e. respect) flows 'bottom-up' from lower age to higher age. Ghanaian culture stresses reverence and deference to elders and authority at all times, as causing an adult to 'lose face' (embarrassed) is considered disrespectful. Tacitly therefore children and young people acquiesce to 'adultism' and thus cannot challenge or disagree with decisions made by adults which they are not in favour of. Twum-Danso (2008) in her research on how to legitimize children's rights in local communities in Ghana discovered that while many adults outrightly reject children's participation and the principles behind it, she found that on closer examination, it was possible to identify areas in parental attitudes and children's experiences of participation in family and community life. She concluded that there were opportunities for children to express their views and participate in decisions in the family and community.

This raises some questions: Can these opportunities be exported from the family and community levels to the national level? If policy makers, who are also family and community members, are willing to create spaces for children's voices in the family and community decisions, can they create similar spaces for children and young people at the national level? Due to the contradictions regarding children's capability to participate in the private and public spheres, there are limited opportunities for children's voices to be heard at the national level in Ghana. For example, Adu-Gyamfi (2013a) has reported that children and young people's participation in the formulation of Ghana's youth policy was limited due to their inability to challenge adult-officials during the consultation exercise. The young people in his study reported being unable to challenge officials because they (i.e. young people) did not want to be perceived by the adult –officials as disrespectful. In a focus group discussion with a young person commented that:

> … some of us were tagged as disrespectful and culturally immature simply because we tried to challenge officials about some of the things been discussed at the youth conference. I believe they deliberately avoided those of us tagged as controversial whenever we raised our hands to make a contribution. I think this contributed to the small number of

> young people seen towards the end of the 3 day conference because they did not see the point of being there if you are not given the chance to talk (Adu-Gyamfi, 2013a:217).

Although some other factors could have contributed to the dwindling number of young people by the end of the conference, it is important to highlight that the young people believed respect for elders limited their ability to challenge officials. Ghana is a 'gerontocratically structured society' where adult-child relations is structured on the basis of age. During gatherings and other community events children and young people do not sit in the company of elders. This, according to a young person is driven by "fear that young people will be arrogant if given the chance to sit with the elders" (Adu-Gyamfi, 2013a:217) and may disrespect them because "the young person might think that he is of the same status as theirs." (ibid). This perhaps implies that the upper rungs of some of the participation typologies may not be applicable in Ghana (see Adu-Gyamfi, 2013b).

Children and young people's reverence for elders at all times is believed to be influenced by a belief in ancestor worship (Salm and Falola, 2002). It is believed that ancestors can either punish or reward the living. It is also believed that elders are the conduit of communication with the ancestors. Hence, respect and reverence for elders could engender rewards for a meaningful life. The implication of this hierarchical arrangement is that children and young people can only dominate and receive respect from those younger than themselves, but must show utmost obedience and respect to those older than themselves. At the family and community level, it is not appreciated or encouraged for children and young people to disagree with adults when decisions are being taken. It is therefore common for children and young people to keep quiet rather than say something that adults would not approve of. According to Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005:87) "a child who repeatedly voices opinions deviating from what is collectively felt is considered to have a bad character." By such cultural ideology any participatory effort that includes both adults and young people together may be counter-productive and thus likely to fail.

With regards to gender, the construction of 'girlhood' influences girls' participation. There seems to be a greater number of males participating in participatory initiatives than females in Ghana. Amadeo et al., (2002) in a study of 16-19 year old young people found that males had higher levels of civic knowledge than females. It is therefore important for a gendered analysis of participating children to be undertaken. Gender studies have helped to unravel that under the guise of community participation more men were actually participating in community decisions than women. It seems that this trend could be continuing under the guise of children's participation where more boys could in fact be participating than girls. A gendered analysis of children's participation is important more so "since girls' and boys' possibilities to emerge as public, political actors are strongly and differently tied to their structural positions in their families." (Gordon, 2008:32).

Adu-Gyamfi (2013a) further reports that a 15 year old girl's desire to develop interest in political issues was opposed by her father, who retorted that "politics was not for girls." This confirms Gordon's (2008:34) argument that "girl's perceive their parents to be significant barriers to their activism in the public sphere." According to Watts and Gesson (2006 cited in Gordon, 2008:34) "parents play a central role in encouraging their kids to become civic-minded and even politically active." Reddy and Ratna (2002) also argue that parents can play a facilitative or inhibitive role in children's participation. This means that for any participatory initiative to be successful the tacit approval of parents is required. Adult mediators were found to be particularly important in promoting girls political activism in a study by Gordon (2008) in which "adult allies buffered the impact of parental worry on girls by serving as a crucial interface to concerned parents." (p.48). The importance of adults in promoting the voice of marginalized children and young people was again highlighted in a

study by Gunn (2002) in which it was recommended that to widen participation "young people should be supported by appropriately trained adults...to identify areas for change and formulate a strategy to pursue these." (p.219). This means that those who argue for higher levels on the participation ladder where children and young people exercise the power to take decisions or engage in their own projects without adult interference, may in effect restrict the participation of girls as it has been established that without adult mediators girls participation may be inhibited. As argued by Lansdown (2010):

> children and young people's relatively powerless status mean that they can only sustain participation where there are adults to facilitate the process...autonomous activity on the part of children is not, in most instances, a realistic goal (Lansdown, 2010:16).

## 3. CONCLUSION

This paper has presented the historical and socio-cultural situation of childhood. The historical study presented has been grouped into 3 broad interrelated categories by Gittins (2010). The first category is concerned with the changing material conditions of families and households (e.g. Shorter, 1976); the second study the emotional and psychological changes in child-rearing practices (e.g. deMause, 1974); and the third category is those who study legal and political changes in governmental attitudes to childhood (e.g. Montgomery, 2009). These studies bring to the fore different ideas about how childhood was constructed – sometimes by physical and/or sexual maturity, by legal status or chronological age – and highlight that there were profound changes in the middle ages that influenced behaviour toward children but they lack consensus on exactly how the changes impacted on childhood. In spite of their disagreement, most agree that the history of childhood was a history of progress (Cunningham, 2005), a move from parental indifference, emotional withdrawal, from a world of neglect and brutality to that of affection and close bonding of the nuclear family, and that of rights.

The discussions have also highlighted that childhood is not a natural, unified category (O'Brien, 2003), but a temporal and transitory concept whose tenure is largely variable in historical and socio-cultural contexts. For example, Ariès (1962) claimed that in medieval times girls by the age of 10 were considered 'little women' and some were mistresses. In deMause's book an account is given of how a mother described her 2 year old daughter as a "regular sexpot" (deMause, 1974:8). However, in contemporary times one would be considered insane and risk long prison sentence for having a 10 year old girl as a mistress. The point being made is that different times and cultures have different ways of classifying who is a child, a classification that has nothing to do with biology or development but by sets of cultural values (James et al., 1998). The cultural values that guide adult-child relations in Ghana are respect and reverence from children and young people to adults at all times. This paper has argued that respect for parents and other elders as the linchpin of socialization in Ghana limits children and young people's participation in decision-making forums. There is therefore a need for separate forums for children and young people to enable them to actively contribute to decision-making.

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