

● **child studies** ○

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EDITORIAL - THE RELEVANCE OF CHILD STUDIES

EDITORIAL – A RELEVÂNCIA DOS ESTUDOS DA CRIANÇA

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This is the inaugural issue of the journal *Child Studies* published by the Research Centre on Child Studies, University of Minho, Portugal. *Child Studies* is an international peer-reviewed journal which publishes empirical and theoretical articles focusing on children's social contexts and their social practices and relationships, both at local and global level and from a contemporary as well as historical viewpoint. Taking a holistic perspective, *Child Studies* aims to provide a multidisciplinary forum for sharing and discussing issues such as children's rights, development and well-being; child education and care services and institutions such as families and schools; professional practices and professional development of social workers, teachers, nurses and other professionals working with children; children's leisure and play in urban spaces and communities; children and the media in the digital world; child and childhood representation in public discourse (media, law, religion, literature, academia...); children and the arts; children's literature; intercultural and intergenerational relations and the broader societal, political and cultural issues impacting children's lived realities.

Child Studies is a multidisciplinary field of research which includes Child Studies is a multidisciplinary field of research which includes perspectives coming from psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists and historians, as well as geographers, philosophers and others. Areas such as education, economics, political science, urbanism, medicine and neurosciences compete in the field, but also converge towards a more holistic understanding of the child. Among the historical founders of the field are great figures of 20th century science, such as Jean Piaget (1896-1980), one of the greatest child psychologists of all time, who created the developmental theory, and Phillipe Ariès (1914-1984) who published *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (originally in French *L'Enfant et la Vie Familiale Sous L'Ancien Régime*, 1960),

one of the most remarkable histories of childhood ever written. Despite the controversy that such pioneers continue to generate, the knowledge they produced has not only contributed greatly to the theoretical advances within their areas but also across other domains, leading to the emergence and consolidation of Child Studies as a multidisciplinary field. In addition, advancements in this area have resulted in the recognition of the heterogeneity of children and childhoods, as opposed to a standardised idea of the child, and, consequently, the contextualised character of child development and social condition. Such advancements have highlighted the fact that the concept of "childhood" did not always exist, essentially being created by modern society. Ariès's study was pivotal in sustaining the notion that childhood only emerged around the seventeenth century. As such it is not a natural and universal phenomenon, but one that is socially and historically constructed.

From the 1980s onwards there have been major theoretical developments in the field of Child Studies largely based on criticism regarding the founding assumptions of developmental psychology and the traditional perspective of socialisation. This perspective is considered inadequate, especially within the field of so-called "New Childhood Studies", for conceiving children as "incomplete" and passive recipients of the culture in which they are born. Such a perspective does not recognise children's competence to interpret and act in the social world. New theoretical and methodological advances in the field, along with recognition of the child's human rights, particularly following the adoption, in 1989, of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, emphasise the idea that children are subjects of rights, thus being citizens both currently and in the future. The Convention highlights children's wide range of rights emphasising that "in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions (...), the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration" (Article 3); "every child has the inherent right to life" (Article 6); and the right of the child "who is capable of forming his or her own views (...) to express these views freely in all matters affecting them"; children "shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard" (Article 12) (United Nations, 1989). Thus, the concept of children's agency has become key, under the consideration that they are capable of affecting and not only being affected by social structures and relationships.

Such developments have stressed the idea that children are full and active members of society and that Child Studies play a pivotal role in understanding the agency of children as social actors and subjects of rights, considering the concrete contexts and circumstances of their voice and participation and not only the formal dimension of children's rights and their advocacy. The critique of adultcentrism does not point to the separation of two different worlds, that of adults and that of children, but rather to the fact that the participation of children is inherently relational, occurring

in partnership with adults. During the Covid-19 pandemic, such issues became clearly apparent, in particular, noticeable levels of inequality in, for example, the access and use of digital technologies as a result of the closure of schools; the need for contexts and situations for children's sociability, peer relations and voice; and the appreciation of outdoor activity and contact with nature, especially children's play. The relational perspective, both considering children's relationships with their peers, but also their relationships with adults, parents and professionals, especially teachers in this case, revealed the theoretical and empirical significance of Child Studies. The pandemic has accentuated issues of inequality and exclusion. The relational dimension was, for instance, largely dependent on family conditions and on the quality of the action and professional development of teachers in order to provide children with opportunities to stay in touch with friends and to express and share what they thought, felt and did during the lockdowns. In general, the pandemic showed that although the virus was universal, it affected children's lives in many different ways. This context has challenged researchers to take into account the idiosyncrasies of children's lived contexts and realities, as well as how they give meaning and express their experiences and to value the views of children in the choices and decisions that concern them. This involves listening to them and taking what they have to say seriously, respecting and putting into practice children's rights, considering their best interests along with the ethical implications of doing research with children. These aspects are key to reinforcing and expanding the field of Child Studies.

The collection of articles in this first issue illustrates the international range and importance of Child Studies. Collectively the authors examine global issues but also specific dimensions that point to the need to further explore child studies in the light of current challenges.

This issue begins with the paper "Play and learning in early childhood education: tensions and challenges", by Elizabeth Ann Wood, from the UK. The author looks at the tension between play for its own sake and educational play in early childhood education drawing on contemporary socio-cultural theories. She discusses issues such as curriculum goals, outcomes and planning within the context of educational play as well as the choices, interests and inquiries made by children in freely chosen play. Wood examines recent research on children's interests and inquiries with regard to pedagogical approaches that connect the curriculum as lived experiences, and curriculum as planned experiences, both of which reflect children's cultural repertoires and peer cultures.

The second paper "Christian values in Portuguese children's and youth literature", by José António Gomes, from Portugal, focuses on the presence of Christian values, and

other aspects related to Christianity, in contemporary Portuguese writing for children and young people. The author argues that values and themes of Christian inspiration are recurrent in such literature regardless of the Christian conviction or confessed beliefs of the authors under analysis.

In the third paper, “Child studies through the lens of applied family social systems theory”, Carl J. Dunst, from the USA, addresses the foundations of an applied family social systems theory for explaining the multiple determinants of child well-being, learning, and development, parenting beliefs, behaviour and practices, and family well-being. Drawing on the applied theory, the author describes the development of an activity setting model of young children’s everyday learning opportunities and a family systems intervention practices model for ensuring parents and other caregivers have the time and psychological energy to provide young children with development-instigating and development-enhancing learning opportunities in the contexts of everyday family and community life. Dunst concludes that results showed that different child characteristics, setting characteristics, parenting behaviour and practices, family and social systems variables, and practitioner measures were empirically related to variations in child, parent, and family outcomes. He also found discernible pathways of influence between family systems intervention model practices, parenting practices, and child outcomes mediated by parent self-efficacy beliefs and parent well-being.

In a similar vein, María José Rodrigo, from Spain, in the fourth paper “Benefits and challenges in the adoption of evidence-based practices in child and family services”, analyses the Council of Europe’s Recommendation by exploring three related directions: i) the modern view of parenting as articulated in three facets: dyadic parenting, team parenting, and social parenting, and their corresponding support needs; ii) the challenges and redefinition of evidence-based practices (EBP) for the field of child and family services; and iii) building of the national agency-university partnership, the translational research-practice bidirectional process, and the implementation and evaluation of evidence-based programmes to foster the adoption of EBP in Spain. The authors advocate for the benefits involved in such complex processes of quality assurance.

In the final paper “Maintaining quality in teacher education: A contemporary global challenge?”, Ian Menter, from the UK, examines the meaning of the term “quality” in the context of teaching and teacher education. Drawing on comparative studies in teacher education, the author discusses how to maintain those aspects of quality that appear to be important in the contemporary development of policy and practice in teacher education. Menter looks at macro and meso levels of policy and practice but also at the micro level taking into consideration state institutions, the roles of educational institutions and the quality of the participants in the provision and

experience of teacher education, respectively. The author argues for the importance of an anthropological approach to teacher education and wider social insights, identifying contemporary global challenges to the maintenance of quality in teacher education.

These articles raise significant questions that require further attention and discussion. They open the dialogue and invite others to join in the examination of child studies in a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspective. *Child Studies* provides a basis for the discussion of these issues, as well as a myriad of others, analysing each topic scientifically through both theoretical and applied approaches. Amid such a plethora of interpretations within this field of research, one essential frame of reference remains, namely the child's multidimensional unity.

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