

A comparative history of childhood: Current research perspectives

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Abstract

This set of reflections aims to indicate some possible paths, to be followed in the field of comparative education, which might contribute to defining the idea of childhood and to seeking the best form of educational care for children in the context of a European and world history of education.

This new history, which also poses numerous methodological questions, has not yet been fully delineated in its development and its anthropological declinations: an attempt is made here, including through examples (which are in no way intended to be exhaustive, but only with the aim of clarifying the discourse), to give a glimpse of its possibilities in terms of epistemology, methodology and content.

La riflessione proposta vuole indicare alcune possibili strade, da percorrere nell'ambito dell'educazione comparata, che possano contribuire a definire l'idea di infanzia e a ricercare le migliori cure educative da riservarle, nell'ambito di una storia dell'educazione europea e mondiale.

Questa nuova storia, che pone anche numerosi interrogativi metodologici, non è ancora stata del tutto delineata nel suo sviluppo e nelle sue declinazioni antropologiche: in questa sede si cercherà, anche attraverso esemplificazioni, che senza nessuna pretesa di esaustività hanno solo lo scopo di rendere più chiaro il discorso, di far intravedere le sue possibilità sia sul piano epistemologico che su quello metodologico e contenutistico.

Keywords: history of childhood; comparative education; educational care; times; places

Parole chiave: storia dell'infanzia; educazione comparata; cura educativa; tempi; luoghi

1. The history of childhood in the West

The history of childhood, as it has been outlined in recent decades, starting with fundamental pioneering work¹, has taken many forms – for example, the history of boys and girls (Covato & Olivieri, 1999, 2001; Seveso 2010), the history of the children of noble families (Ferrari, 2000; Ferrari et al., 2016) and of common people. Indeed, Egle Becchi recalls: “Reading childhood today, in its ages, according to the signs that it gives of itself, is a new and suggestive hermeneutic work; but so is trying to read it in scenarios of the past, where the conditions of children were different and the testimonies that the child gave of himself were also different” (Becchi, 2002, p. 341).

This new history has made it possible to focus, albeit through documentary research often characterised by problematic heuristics and hermeneutics (Ferrari, 2006), on at least three equally important, though still asymmetrical, and not equally developed, strands of investigation.

The first is the social history of childhood and its living conditions, the institutions that govern it and the practices of control that affect it. This history is linked to the material and social life of childhood and to educational practices. The second is the history that reconstructs cultural and social images of childhood (that is, ideologies, including scientific ones) as structural and organic conceptions of the child’s world. The third is the history of the imaginary: it is a matter of grasping the changes or continuities that occur in the history of mentality in relation to the phenomenon of childhood, of identifying and classifying the different attitudes – internal, mental, collective or group-based – that are externalised in documents linked to the imaginary sphere, such as artistic and literary works or, in some respects, philosophical and pedagogical reflections, through which childhood is viewed and attempts are made to enclose it in a network of definitions, including normative ones. It is a matter of reconstructing experience within the major stages of historical evolution and in the variety of historical durations.

Cambi, outlining three perspectives of understanding/development of childhood – historical-theoretical, cultural-social and scientific-literary – emphasises its “multifaceted identity together with its complex and dynamic problematic nature” (Cambi et al., 2012, p. vii), characteristics that underline the inherent value of childhood and the need to protect and understand it in terms of the innovative and transformative messages of freedom, happiness, play, equality-authority and creativity that it conveys.

It is possible to trace a common purpose in the histories of childhood, which is the same purpose as in the history of pedagogy, made explicit by Cambi in the introduction to the volume dedicated to the *Storia dell’infanzia nell’Italia liberale* (History of childhood in liberal Italy): “Its purpose is not apologia or persuasion, but, more modestly, the exercise of memory, that is, the recovery of past forms (of life, of culture, of politics) and their keeping alive as a “lesson” for the present and the future, as an exemplar of other human possibilities” (Cambi, 1988, p. 2).

This last expression is worth dwelling on because it is also interesting in a comparative sense: history, like comparison, opens us up to “other possibilities of the human”, thus prompts us to confront the idea of the Western man-woman-child, which scholars in this part of the world have learnt and studied and which is sometimes regarded as absolutely true, albeit under a perpetual process of construction.

In that 1988 volume, Cambi writes: “there are also other shortcomings to be noted (the lack of interest in more distant, pre-medieval or non-European childhoods) or the need to broaden the sources of this study, both on the social terrain - retrieving, for example, “family books” or oral testimony - and regarding the imaginary - giving space to literature, philosophies, religious ideologies” (1988, p. 7).

The invitation was to explore studies in greater depth, not least in a comparative sense, in order to address other ideas of childhood, of the child, of the educational relationship, outside the known, albeit painstakingly

constructed, schemes. The sociology of the family has also proposed active models of education in the different types of families, just as “cultural anthropology provides a comparative analysis of childhood, pre-adolescence and adolescence, with relativistic outcomes in relation to Western educational models” (Cambi et al., 2012, p. 10).

The work of the historian, and in this case of the historian of childhood, must be characterised by an objectivity that “is always interpretative and dialectical, never (and I stress never) ostensive and unambiguous” (Cambi, 1988, p. 2), and this also applies to the historian-comparativist who delves, not only into the folds of time, but often also into the recesses of the world’s physical space and the undefined space of other cultures.

In the Western, European and American tradition, scholars often move within a framework of preconstructed theses, which are difficult to modify or refute because they arise from the *a priori*, or we could call them ‘un-thought-of’, of the, in part pedagogical, culture of the northeast of the world. Here are some examples of the theses that support the histories of childhood that have been traced so far or are better known: Philip Ariès (1960) argues that the history of childhood is a progressive and optimistic one; De Mause (1974) that the history of childhood has its own continuity and centrality in the violence on the child as a stable and intimate connotation and that consciousness, attention and respect are found above all in the cultural elites. Postman (1982) affirms that the history of childhood is intertwined with the ideological transformation brought about by technology, but *pro tempore* insofar as the very idea of childhood subsequently entered into decline with the advent of mass media that brought the child closer to the adult because they became immersed in the same imagery. The American scholar speaks of technological dependence, isolation and psychological passivity of the child. Perhaps by investigating more thoroughly and searching for different sources or religious, cultural and social traditions of minorities, will we be able, even in the West, to discover a history of childhood that is no longer written according to pre-judged theoretical outlines, but rather consists of alternative minority paths, which are nonetheless not minor in importance.

2. The history of childhood in Western minorities

The comparison between childhood in different cultures, which have coexisted in the West for centuries, is a field of research that is still largely ignored by scientific pedagogical studies. However, the history of childhood, precisely because of its subject matter, is interdisciplinary and methodologically “contaminated” by other human sciences (Polenghi, 2017).

The Jewish or Islamic presence, for example, goes back a long way in Europe, but we still do not know much about education in synagogues or mosques, and perhaps less about education in the Ashkenazi Orthodox families of Eastern Europe or the Sephardic families of the Iberian peninsula. We know relatively little, pedagogically speaking, about the sharia that governs Islamic family law, which, for example, poses serious problems for the recognition of the *International Convention on the Rights of the Child in Islamic countries* (Zani, 2004, pp. 33-35) or about the institution of adoption – which therefore modifies the idea of “child” as it is recognised in the West. Even where scientific studies have been carried out, they are either from a sociological a psychological or a legal perspective, or more recently from an anthropological perspective (LeVine & New, 2009), but without taking into consideration the pedagogical perspective.

Above all, they lack a comparative perspective that is not simply a juxtaposition of collected data but is capable – through a serious application of Bereday and Hilker’s classic method, renewed in its perspectives by re-cent updates – of constructing models that allow those data to be compared in order to relate them, for example, to the pedagogical categories underlying practices such as care, development, human improvement, personal training or social training.

An example of this type of comparison could be constructed based on a reflection involving the family, that ever-present and most ancient of human institutions. The history of childhood in the West, in fact, has been constantly intertwined with the history of the family: children have always found their natural place within this institution, the first educational relationship is with their parents, and with the mother in particular. Furthermore, the very constitution of the idea of childhood, or the feeling of childhood as Ariès calls it, has also stemmed from the transformations that the family has undergone over the centuries. It is no coincidence that educational historians have thoroughly investigated the phenomenon of abandonment as a negative consequence of the intertwining of these two histories (Di Bello, 1989, 1993).

It might be interesting then to investigate the history of the family and childhood within other cultural traditions, as mentioned earlier, not only with the intention of constructing different historical-educational pathways, but also with the aim of comparing the data collected so that they help, on the one hand, to better understand the very idea of childhood, and, on the other, to rethink effective educational practices.

Briefly, and simplifying complex processes, we can draw on the Jewish cultural tradition: Judaism – which has long been present in Europe as an often persecuted minority civilisation, but also in dialogue with the Christian majority – is an integral part of European history, including educational history.

In the ancient Jewish tradition, the woman, who shares with God the capacity to generate life, has a protective-loving role that redefines her creative and energetic aspects: the mother within the family takes care of the children who are the object of her love, while the father sees in them the guarantee of hereditary succession. Children are nevertheless perceived as important because they are a gift from God and a guarantee of the future.

The Jewish law, *l'halakab*², prescribes the care to be given to the child, which includes bathing, washing hands, dental, nail and hair care, and establishes the child's right to be in the open air, to sleep regularly, to play with toys appropriate to his or her age and development, and to eat properly. The close spatial and emotional contact that the Rabbis recommend to mothers, the lovingly offered stimuli and the dialogic principle that underpins education, aim to convey to children the idea of being important and this self-awareness leads them to develop a sense of responsibility towards the community. Moral education, therefore, and not just rearing, is also delegated to mothers.

In the 18th century, however, the Jewish communities living in the Shtetl, that is, in isolated villages in eastern Europe subject to the *pogroms* (persecutions), lived in extremely precarious economic conditions and delegated the physical survival of the family entirely to women because men were busy with Torah study. In that context, then, the negative stereotype of the *Yidische Mame* was born, the cold, insensitive, unapproachable mother, who denies emotional warmth, care, and assistance to her children because she is busy, mostly in commerce, providing sustenance for her family and education for her husband and sons. The adverse conditions of the socio-economic context cause us to forget the importance of childhood and place it in a position of neglect and inferiority (Herweg, 1996).

It seems, therefore, that the feeling of childhood developed within Jewish communities well before the modern age, the period in which we know it was placed by Ariès and was beginning to wane just as it was developing in the western regions of Europe.

A pedagogical-comparative investigation, which focuses on the two ideas of childhood developed in Europe and interprets them through a historical-social-cultural-religious analysis, could therefore help us to construct a more precise history of childhood, as a social history, as a history of images and ideologies, and as a history of the imaginary. It would certainly elucidate certain categories, such as that of educational care which was mentioned earlier, or polarities/antinomies, such as personal formation and social formation, in this case within the family and in societies that are organised in various cultural and economic ways.

Through this type of comparative analysis, even the historical periods which Westerners are accustomed to thinking about are questioned and thus confirm the non-linearity of historical processes and the variety of durations of historical time.

On the one hand, it is possible to add new perspectives to the “long-lasting discovery” of the specificity of childhood, which is connected to cultural ideologies and scientific research, and which constantly poses the question “who is the child, per se?”, captured in his or her bio-psychological identity. Furthermore, one can investigate how, necessarily, this identity is transcribed in different anthropological-cultural forms. On the other hand, the comparative perspective applied to the history of childhood can lead to an understanding of which institutions and rules, tried, and tested in other traditions, best favour the harmonious growth of children.

The first purpose falls within the academic-cognitive perspective of comparative education, aimed at clarifying concepts and delving into pedagogical theories and ideas. The second can be understood within applied comparative education, which intends to transfer pedagogical theories and educational practices to enrich and enhance education in different countries or places around the world, but also to inspire the present, with appropriate changes, by looking at the educational past (Cowen, 2023)³.

It is worth mentioning here that from this second perspective, simple transpositions are to be avoided and instead a constant and careful reflection on the phenomenon of *Transfer* is required, defined, to quote Cowen, as *translation* and *transformation*, that is, the movement of ideas and educational practices which, as they move in supra- or inter- or transnational space – and, one might add, time – undergo changes and real metamorphoses that can also radically change their meaning.

Another figure that has long been marginalised and is now looked at with great interest and attention is the female figure, within a world that for centuries was dominated by male cultural, social, and educational categories.

This type of research is of great interest in order to investigate a particular anthropological otherness, namely that of gender, and to interpret the history of female childhood in different places and times, enabling comparison of educational events in relation to specific female-dominated categories. Similarities or complete divergences in the history of girls may emerge with respect, for example, to the dichotomy indicated by Simonetta Ulivieri (1999) in the introduction to the volume *Le bambine nella storia dell'educazione* (Girls in the history of education), namely that between girls on paper, imagined and described, and their real image, present in everyday life. It would be interesting, therefore, to compare pedagogical strategies used in other places in the world with girls in order to differentiate them from boys, to make them different social subjects through targeted educational paths that create female knowledge, roles and destinies.

Moreover, the comparison, also being carried out in the present, could make use of documents reporting the direct voice of girls, such as diaries or interviews, highlighting disconcerting historical permanences in different areas of the world where, for example, education is still the prerogative of men: think, for instance, of the well-known diary of the young Pakistani activist Malala (2013), but also of lesser-known stories, such as that of little Ukmina (Manoori, 2022) who “does not exist” because she is educated as a male⁴, or the phenomenon of child brides that is widespread in vast geographical areas and witnessed in numerous autobiographies published in recent years (Ali, 2016; Fatima, 2012; Viswanathan, 2009).

3. The history of childhood in other places and cultures

Another intrinsic purpose of comparative education is that of questioning oneself and one’s cultural, historical, political, but above all educational beliefs, understanding that they are not universal, that they are not necessarily the best possible, that they must be compared and scrutinised through comparison with other beliefs within the

inescapable horizon of respect for human rights and the enhancement of human capacities, as defined, for example, by Sen (1985) or Bauman (2005; 2008), but also by pedagogist Stefania Gandolfi, the UNESCO Chair on *Diritti dell'uomo ed etica della cooperazione internazionale* (Human rights and ethics of international cooperation) (Gandolfi, 2006; Gandolfi & Rizzi, 1997, 2013; 2001).

With this in mind, by looking further into space and within cultures without neglecting their historical development, we can at least integrate current Western knowledge, which is sometimes the result of an over-interpretative history because it is poor in sources with meagre and problematic materiality and construct different paths that challenge our certainties.

We can, for example, check whether the three areas indicated by historiography as belonging to the “deep” dimension of children’s history – that is, violence (Polenghi, 2016), labour and exploitation and social control and its forms - have been universally shared.

Once more, some research studies seem to contrast, at least in part, these beliefs. By way of example, three concern different areas of the world: first, Confucian East Asia (Taiwan, South Korea, Japan); second, China, the USA and Japan; third, vast areas of the world - Africa, Israel, Japan, England, the USA and many other states.

The history of Japanese childhood is not exempt from forms of violence towards children, but tradition also proposes other models that are freer and free from adult social control. Numata (2006)⁵ has published an essay entitled *Che cosa hanno perso i bambini con la modernizzazione dell'educazione? Una comparazione fra Asia ed Europa* (What Children Have Lost by the Modernisation of Education: A Comparison of Experiences in Western Europe and Eastern Asia), focused on changes in the way children have been viewed from pre-modern to modern times, in both the West and the East. The scholar first dwells on a number of dissimilarities that bear on the comparison. In Japan and France there is a different historical periodisation, indeed, in the Asian region, the Edo era (1603-1868) was followed by the Meiji imperial restoration that began between 1868 and 1869, in the European state the Ancien régime (1648-1789) was followed by the French Revolution of 1789. Numata points out that the duration of childhood, as a specific age of life, differs in the two countries, so he decides to standardise it by considering the life span from 0 to 14-15 years; furthermore, the social position of the children considered is not that of the European nobility who had a tutor or that of the Asian samurai who had their own school called *banko*, but that of ordinary people who did not benefit from privileged education systems.

The scholar retraces all the stages of development of the history of European childhood, starting with Rousseau, in an itinerary, starting from the modern age, that sees the laborious emergence of the awareness of childhood as an age with its own characteristics, distinct from the adult age. When he goes on to illustrate the idea of childhood in countries where Confucianism prevails, he starts from a premise that is of a religious-anthropological kind, and not a pedagogical one: children and the elderly are considered sacred creatures because they have just come from another world, considered sacred, or because they are about to return to it. The pedagogical implication is immediate: adults admire children because their world of cheerfulness and spontaneity is esteemed and respected, sometimes even to the point of taking an over-indulgent attitude towards them and showing a reluctance towards letting them grow. The world of children is lively, serene and happy, and the transition to adulthood is gradual because the relationship with adults is harmonious. This does not mean that these countries are exempt from abandonment or even sale of children due to the precarious economic conditions of families, but adults’ view of children is different.

This conception of childhood also explains *juku* in the Edo period, which are not an institution, but a place where the child learns by imitation from what the teachers do. These teachers, both men and women, are samurai, Buddhist monks, doctors of medicine, Shinto priests and ordinary people. Education happens by

“penetration”, not by teaching, because the child is surrounded by good models: we could say that this type of education makes use of the powerful educational medium of example, often neglected in the modern West.

This represents only one part of Numata’s extremely articulate essay, which also makes a comparison with the modern era. However, moving this necessary simplification aside, the aim is to highlight the fact that various anthropological premises are capable of undermining our convictions about childhood and prompting us to investigate more deeply, in this case, the profound dimension of the social control exercised by adults over children, educational practices and places. The premise about the not only good, but sacred nature of childhood provokes pedagogical outcomes that in the West would have been considered unthinkable and probably subversive of a social order that did not contemplate this age of life as being structural, contrary to what happens in East Asia.

Viewing human anthropology from this point of view would also allow us to develop studies aimed at answering another fundamental question for the history of childhood: is childhood to be protected and allowed to develop in its intrinsic and Rousseauian goodness and its Confucian sacredness or, according to Freudian teaching, is it perverse and polymorphous, hence subversive, and therefore to be normalised and bent to moral rules?

The anthropological-educational research that gave rise to the volume edited by LeVine and New (2009) entitled *Antropologia e infanzia. Sviluppo, cura, educazione: studi classici e contemporanei* (Anthropology and Child. Development: A Cross-Cultural Care, Education: Classical and Cultural Reader) focuses on the development of the child and his or her enculturation, and contributes to outlining a more comprehensive idea of childhood. The different modes of rearing and care that follow the cultural constants of communities, analysed by authors who are scholars of anthropology and education – writes Mantovani in the *Preface* of the Italian edition – lead us to reconsider and question popular educational strategies. The enculturation of children, rooted in communities and the concept of childhood expressed in them, offers much to be reflected upon as it reveals “educational concerns that are both ancient and current”, leads “to the undertaking, with meticulous attention, flexibility and progressive agility, of a constant and simultaneous exercise of multi-level interpretation and double cognitive and cultural decentralisation” (p. XVII).

The last study *Infanzia in tre culture* (Childhood in three cultures) (Tobin et al., 2000) puts the Japanese, Chinese and American childcare services into a comparative perspective, taking as parameters of comparison certain key elements such as the problem of “vices”, parental investment in children, the world of children, childcare services and parents, the qualities of a good teacher, gender differences and socio-economic factors, coming to the conclusion that childcare services are agents of preservation rather than of change. In this sense, the research, which also had similar outcomes twenty years later (Tobin et al., 2011), leads us to think “pre-school facilities are institutions that reflect the cultures and societies of which they are a part and at the same time help to preserve them” (p. 262). Despite the complex reflections involving ethnography and sociology, these studies reflect an educational reality that tends to normalise childhood and preserve it from change, which should instead be one of the characteristics of this age.

Even in a recent study by Roberto Pellerey (2016) on NGO (non-governmental organisation) night schools, educational practices emerge that, in order to safeguard children who are exploited during the day at work, prioritise a positive result over the principle that child labour is unacceptable. This should cause globalised adult society to reflect on its own inability to protect children, especially in places outside the West, where it is not a matter of “transplanting” educational institutions deemed indispensable but, pragmatically, of improving the living conditions of a denied childhood. The practices implemented by NGOs all over the world tend to make the child a truly active protagonist of his or her life in connection with local communities, a child who is no longer the individual victim of the adult, but a force for change in the community. A different anthropological

view of the nature of childhood and its place in society frees the child from a role that actually holds him or her captive in a vicious circle.

Such studies can be an important source for pedagogical-comparative research and make an essential contribution to the study of childhood and its history, as long as the pedagogical centrality is maintained in the argumentation, without straying into other disciplines.

Comparative education, in its epistemological and methodological specificity, is able to compare the many histories of childhood with its own purposes: on the one hand to make the complex concept of education clearer by adding pedagogical meanings to this idea, and on the other hand to hypothesise both temporal and geographical shifts that respect the socio-cultural contexts from which they originate and to which they are introduced (Palomba, 2011, 2014).

4. Conclusion

From the brief considerations offered, it is clear how comparative education can make a significant contribution to the history of childhood, and how it can help to write a world history of education that includes the history of all girls and boys. This history, renewed in its epistemology and contaminated in its methods by other disciplines, can not only help to clarify the anthropologically “other” nature of childhood, but can also compare social, cultural and imaginary histories by looking at them from different perspectives. Indeed, being a “child” varies in the history of world cultures and in the different physical places that childhood has inhabited, throughout history and today. Studying the growth of boys and girls within non-Western civilisations reveals the many “othernesses” of childhood that are not limited to its lack of recognition or to the valorisation of particular aspects but capture its profound differences with adulthood and its unexpressed potential. It is precisely in the comparison that two concepts clearly emerge: firstly, it can be stated that the solutions found in the West to recognise childhood, its peculiarities, and its rights, are not universal paths that we can conceive of “exporting” throughout the world, not even from a political point of view. Children, within different communities, find different paths of emancipation, growth and education that may be cross-contaminated, but never identical. Secondly, the search for educational practices that help the healthy and happy growth of children also, or perhaps above all, passes through the comparison of what exists, past and present, and of the solutions that adults and, even children themselves, have experienced and are experiencing today within real, problematic, and complex contexts, but which are sometimes also favourable to their growth.

The analysis and comparison of past and present theories and practices contributes to the delineation of a history of childhood that transcends national borders, with a view to a history that is geographically and culturally broader.

Note

1. Important works in Italy include those by Egle Becchi (Becchi, 1994, 2002; Becchi & Julia, 1996; Becchi & Semeraro, 2001); Leonardo Trisciuzzi (1990), a scholar who addressed not only the social, but also the scientific and cognitive discovery of childhood (see also Trisciuzzi & Cambi, 1989); Franco Cambi and Simonetta Ulivieri (1988). In Europe see the seminal work of Philippe Ariés (1960) and in the USA the studies of De Mause (1974) and Postman (1982).
2. The law consists of the traditional religious regulations codified in the *Torah* and Talmudic and rabbinic laws. It regulates not only religious beliefs and practices, but also numerous aspects of daily life.

3. Cowen, in his last article published posthumously, lists the topics that require prolonged discussion, and in fourth place he places “cold” topics, insufficiently investigated, but necessary for planning the future, including the political future: “In contrast, there are, fourthly, certain ‘cold’ topics about which for so long we have said so very little. They include war, revolution, Empires (Cowen, 2014) and, these days, religion (Cowen 2019; Sivasubramaniam & Hayhoe, 2018). These are not topics ready to be ‘rescued’ in a short article. They are major silences. They have not entered our past very much, never mind our future. They now need very full statements of why and how they are important, within a comparative education that is not aimed at policy advice” (Cowen, 2023).
4. Growing up in a village in the Afghan mountains, Ukmina, born after seven daughters and three sons who died early, is raised as a boy. According to tradition, tolerated even by the mullahs, she becomes a *bacha posh*, a “girl dressed as a boy” who saves the family from the misfortune of having only female daughters. But when she reaches puberty, the adults would like to force her to become a girl again, wear the veil and be dependent on her husband. In order to remain free to speak and act, Ukmina has no choice but to rebel, but she has to pay for her freedom.
5. Hiroyuki Numata, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and History of Education at Tohoku University in Sendai, Japan, studied in Strasbourg, Germany and Cambridge.

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