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“No one Knows us More than We Know Ourselves” —The Image of the Child and Childhood in the Perception of Primary School Students, Grades 1–3

Marta Makarewicz¹**ABSTRACT**

The image of the child and childhood is one of the key research issues in the social sciences, constituting an important aspect that shapes our understanding of the development and upbringing of children. The purpose of this paper is to present the results of a study on the image of the child and childhood from the perspective of primary school students in grades 1–3, based on the conducted group interviews. The respondents present the image of the child and childhood in a realistic way, taking into account various concepts, visions and ways of thinking about the child. The interviewees pointed out a number of advantages and disadvantages of being a child, relating them to the special qualities of being a child and to relationships with adults. The children’s statements revealed their beliefs built on their own experiences.

KEYWORDS: child, childhood, studies with the participation of children, early childhood education

Introduction

Transformations in the perception of the child and childhood, reflecting profound socio-cultural changes, have led to the reconstruction and reinterpretation of the image of the child, giving new meanings to the concept. It is believed that childhood “is a historical construct that is conditioned by the political, social and cultural changes that characterize a particular era” (Guz, 2018, p. 95), hence the usage of precise termi-

1 Faculty of Education, University of Białystok, Poland.
E-MAIL: m.makarewicz@uwb.edu.pl ORCID: 0000-0002-4499-1681

nology seems impossible due to the complexity of childhood issues or the multiplicity of perspectives and attitudes toward young people which have been shaped over the years. Previous theoretical and research deliberations have led, among others, to the development of numerous conceptions of childhood (Izdebska, 2015), the identification of existing problems and threats (Jarosz, 2008; Matyjas, 2008; Segiet, 2011), or the formation of an important children's rights movement (Smolińska-Theiss, 2000; Lenzer, 2002; Michalak, 2018).

A special role in the construction of the contemporary image of the child and childhood is attributed to the development of interdisciplinary research on childhood (Kehily, 2008; Zwiernik, 2015; Matyjas, 2022). E. Jarosz assesses that

"in the last decade, research on childhood has become a complex area of contemporary scientific reflection on the reality of children, a specific reflection that seeks to understand the situation and problems of children with their participation and narration" (2017, pp. 58–59).

Recognizing and incorporating children's perspectives and opinions on selected issues of their daily lives bring a new quality to the study of child and childhood issues.

Subject literature is dominated by studies of how the child and childhood are perceived by adults, including teachers and parents, while less frequent attempts are made to understand how the child sees themselves and their place in the family or school environment (Ornacka, 2011; Segiet, 2011). In addition, there are some studies of how children in the younger grades of primary school perceive childhood as a stage of life and its characteristics (Guz, 2018). Therefore, the study of the image of the child and childhood from the perspective of students in grades 1–3 is not only interesting, but also relevant to the development of conceptual constructs and the direction of further work, including the recognition of children's needs and the role of adults in supporting comprehensive development.

Contemporary perceptions of the child and childhood

Researchers place the issue of the child and childhood in historical, philosophical and cultural contexts (Szczepka-Pustkowska, 2011; Doliwa, 2020; Śliwerski, 2020; Kiszka, 2023), as well as show the significant impact of developments in the social sciences on the understanding of the essence of childhood (Jarosz, 2018; Segiet, 2011). Pedagogical and psychological analyses emphasize the positive transformations resulting from interdisciplinary research on childhood and the emergence of developmental theories relevant to building a complex image of the child and a deeper understanding of the child's functioning (Appelt, 2001; Segiet, 2011). S. Guz emphasizes that "today, there

are different ways of being a child and different types of childhood. This is because the nature and quality of childhood depends on a number of factors, phenomena and processes occurring in the child's living environment and on a global scale" (2018, p. 97).

Noteworthy are the transformations related to the child-adult relationship, emphasizing a partnership based on respect and reciprocal learning. This is emphasized by K. Appelt: "The child is an equal partner in the adult-child relationship, because the child also contributes to the relationship, and is not subject only to passive shaping by the adult. Because the child is a subject in the full sense of the word, and between them and the adult there is a difference in the level of competence (once in favour of one, once in favour of the other partner of the relationship), stimulating both to develop" (2001, p. 3). Indeed, in the contemporary pedagogical literature we are dealing with the image of the child as an autonomous individual with special rights and a place in society. However, this does not preclude the responsible role of adults in building relationships with children, offering them age-appropriate support and care.

Today, individual, personal narratives are gaining traction too. In this view, "modern childhood is being treated and studied (recognized) as subjectively experienced by children. (...) The child is not only the constructor of their world and their own development, who needs support, reinforcement, guidance in gathering experiences and their critical analysis, and support in learning, but is also a subject in the study and development of knowledge about childhood and in solving problems experienced by children" (Jarosz, 2018, p. 170). Recognizing full subjectivity and creating space for children's participation exemplifies contemporary thinking about the child. K. Doliwa attributes to the school a key role in the formation of a subjective approach to children, seeing the development of education and the institution of the school as a catalyst for changes in human mentality (2020). Despite the growing public awareness and transformation, we still face the problem of infantilization and behaviourism that continues to manifest itself in pedagogical practice, according to the warnings by researchers in the field of preschool and early school (Klus-Stańska & Nowicka, 2005).

Today, researchers give special value to childhood and its quality. K. Ornacka writes about the impact of this period of life on the subsequent fate of an individual: "Childhood, therefore, is not just a phase of life that is ongoing or has passed, but is the 'core' of each of us—it creates in us a place for the accumulation of new experiences, as well as equips us with the skills of coexistence and interaction with others" (2011, p. 9). A similar view is presented by S. Guz, who defines childhood as "a set of specific experiences, a world of experiences and activities recorded in the biography of an individual, having significance in the formation of the individual's identity" (2018, p. 97). This perspective reveals the impact of the quality of childhood and accumulated experiences on a person's subsequent life, attitudes and life choices. The experi-

ence of childhood will vary depending on the country, family and school environment (Śliwerski, 2020). In order to responsibly co-create a quality environment for children's lives, the children's personal visions of modern childhood must be brought to the fore.

Research methodology

Research with the participation of children requires special care and adherence to methodological ethics at every stage of the research process. J. Zwiernik writes: "In studying childhood from the position of a qualitative researcher, several aspects must be taken into account. One of them is the researcher-adult-child relationship. In order to truly gain an insight into the children's perspective, we must get rid of unjustified condescension towards their statements, and, showing them respect and patience, listen attentively to what they have to say to us" (2015, p. 94). This view of the persons under study reflects concern for the child seen as an expert on the child's world of experiences. The research adopts the perspective that the child is an active creator of their world and development, and the child's experiences are an important source of personal knowledge (Zwiernik, 2015; Matyjas, 2022).

The purpose of the study was to learn more about the image of the child and childhood as perceived by primary school students in grades 1–3. The following research problems were posed:

1. How do primary school students in grades 1–3 perceive the concepts of a child and childhood?
2. What are the characteristics of children in the opinion of primary school students in grades 1–3?
3. What qualities are attributed to children by primary school students in grades 1–3?
4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a child from the perspective of primary school students in grades 1–3?

A focus group interview, i.e. a variation of group discussion was used, during which the researcher, through questions, encourages the exchange of opinions and experiences, thereby fostering natural interaction between participants (Juszczyk, 2013). This is extremely important in the context of examining the perspective of children, for whom the assurance of free and safe conditions makes it possible to obtain as complete and, above all, authentic a picture of the selected issues as possible. Students in grades 1–3 of a non-public primary school participated in the study. A total of 29

children were examined, with adherence to all standards and ethics of research with children, according to the *"Kodeks dobrych praktyk w badaniach z dziećmi [Code of good practice in research with the participation of children]"* (2017) formulated by E. Maciejewska-Mroczeek and M. Reimann.

Test results

Analysis of the children's statements, collected during group interviews, led to the emergence of the following images of the child and childhood. The first and one of the most strongly emphasized categories by the respondents are statements relating to the time frame of childhood:

"A child is a person who is young and less than 18 years old." (Tymon, age 9)

"A child in general is one that is at most 17 years old, because 18 is already going to be big [an adult]. (...) It's as if the child is young and may not understand some things yet, and some things they can." (Basia, age 8)

"Age is what you can recognize a child by. If someone is an adult, they are over 18 years old. If someone is still a child, they are under 18 years old." (Tytus, age 8)

"A child is someone who has not turned eighteen." (Julia, age 10)

Such descriptions fit the basic definition of a child as a person under the age of eighteen (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). The students under study indicate the time frame of childhood, and establish a clear age line between childhood and adulthood. They also view the child as a person in the process of growing up, and childhood as a certain stage in a person's life that leads to adulthood.

"A child is the kind of person who grows. This person keeps growing and growing, only stopping at a certain age." (Kaja, age 8)

During the interviews, the perspective of the child as a person with special rights was also repeatedly revealed. In the statements quoted below, students list a number of social, economic and personal rights guaranteed by legal acts:

"Children have more rights than adults. Rights of the child. You can't beat children, you have to feed them... and the child has the right to be cared for. Also to be treated when they are sick." (Julia, age 10)

"Children have unique rights. Very many of these rights, even I don't know all of them. The right to be animated, the right to wear clothes, the right to express one's own ideas." (Filip, age 9)

"There are also children's rights. One of those rights is that the child has more time off, that you [the child] don't have to work. In China, for example, it is sometimes so

that [in] poorer families... children have to work and don't get paid for it, somehow they have to. Such people must be supported and offered help." (Lidia, age 8)

"A child has the right to go to school and have friends. To eat the kind of food that suits them and tastes good." (Zosia, age 9)

"Children have the right to learn, to go to hospital." (Pola, age 10)

The respondents' narratives also resonate with the image of the child as a person in a family relationship. Perceiving oneself in the context of family relations is embedded in the view that nowadays "being a child means existing either in the family or in the context of the family, and therefore functioning simultaneously in the dimension of mutual relationships and distances between all members of the family system" (Ornacka, 2011, p. 9). Importantly, the respondents made statements about their parents as seen through the lens of genetic similarity and personality traits.

"A child has a mother, sometimes they may not have parents, but more often they do. (...) Because when a child is born, they have something; moreover, a child takes after the parent, because they [the child] always have something similar. The child's feelings are the same, they have the same eye and hair colour." (Basia, age 8)

"This is someone who is young. Certainly younger than their parents. When one is young, they don't go to work yet; when one is an adult, they go to work." (Tytus, age 8)

"A child is also someone who was born. It's not like a child falls from the sky and suddenly appears in the world. A child does not fall from the sky, someone has to give birth to it after all, but the child will take after their parents, because they give the child part of their genes." (Lidia, age 8)

This type of perspective is related to the respondents' perception of the child as a dependent person who requires adequate care from adults. In numerous statements, the child appears as a sentient being, but above all with certain needs—physiological needs, the need for belonging and contact with others, and the need for fun and games.

"A child is one who has more... care. The child is more to be taken care of, because adults already know so much about what needs to be done, because, for example, a child won't load the dishwasher on their own." (Natalia, age 6)

"Children need to be taken care of." (Alicja, age 8)

"A child is a person who needs fun and games, food and care for their life." (Pola, age 9)

"A child is someone who also has feelings, and children very often learn from their mistakes. (...) A child has feelings and needs. For example, a child needs their parents' attention, a child needs to spend time with them. Children need to be taken care of." (Ola, age 9)

In addition, the respondents recognize the special role of errors in human development, as well as the resulting inability to perform a number of household chores. In the course of the discussion, the respondents also recognized situations in which their behaviour is misinterpreted, resulting in strong adult reactions.

"Sometimes we think we're doing the right thing or we do something unintentionally and adults yell at us too." (Ola, age 10)

"For example, when I want to help my parents, they totally don't see it, and then they think I did it just out of spite, and they yell at me." (Maks, age 9)

In the search for an answer to the question of who a child is from the perspective of students in grades 1–3, an important category is statements relating to being a child in the eyes of others close to them.

"Children are, for example, parents, grandmothers, great-grandmothers are also children, because they too were born, they too were taken care of. In general, people differ very little, because in fact children and adults are almost the same." (Zofia, age 8)

"A child can be, for example, a lady, a mum, because the mum still has a grandfather and grandmothers, that is, they are parents. And for young children, these children, the parents, they are grandma and grandpa." (Tytus, age 9)

"A child doesn't differ so much from the parents, because the parents are somehow children too, but ones that are more adult and responsible for the condition of their children." (Lidia, age 8)

"Children grow up, but adults also have their mum, and the mum also has her mum, so, for example, a mum, an adult, and her mum are the ones who say, for example, 'Hello, daughter', also in the same way." (Oliwia, age 7)

"Adults are also children to a certain extent, because someone once gave birth to them... and also took care of them. For example, there is a child and then they give birth to a child and this child and so on. A family is then formed." (Ala, age 8)

"Children are human." (Bruno, age 7)

This type of outlook assumes that one is a child from the moment of birth, and that further functioning is closely linked to the family structure. Students again point to relationality, but also significant similarities between a child and an adult (parents or grandparents). Against the background of the last quoted statement, an analogy cannot be avoided with the way of thinking about the child similar to that of Janusz Korczak (Smolińska-Theiss, 2013).

Respondents also raised the issue of lost childhood, marked by hardship. The presented deliberations reveal children's reflections on life without a parent in a war situation.

"Children may have no parents, for example, when there is a baby and has no parents or [lost them] in the war. It can also be like this. Most children have parents, well, because only [in] the past... Because there are wars nowadays too... for Ukraine, not for Poland, so that's why more children have parents, but sometimes it happens that parents go to war without a child. They may get killed, and the baby may just be born. The baby is in hospital. How can the child be in hospital then and who is to take care of them? Someone who is next to (...)." (Oliwia, age 7)

"Usually it's the mum who stays to take care [of the child], only the dad goes to war. Unless the dad is dead, then she has to [go to war] too and leaves the child behind. Unless she can also, for example, take the child, only then it would be a greater risk to the child. Sometimes it also happens that, for example, if the child is already a little older, for example, above eighteen, then they also go to war, and it's a little bit uncool, because as if the child, who is still kind of half a child... It's a little bit sad, because they were still a child only recently. It can also be that babies... then you don't leave one alone, so the parents also take them and they also kind of can... and it's kind of sad." (Kaja, age 8)

Students also recognize children with various disabilities that impinge on their functioning in society:

"There are children, some, who don't have access to certain things because they have disabilities, for example. For example, their various body parts are missing, they are in a wheelchair, or they can't see or feel anything." (Kaja, age 8)

"There is something that some children don't have... But they must not be laughed at." (Lidia, age 8)

Interviewees were also asked to characterize the child in terms of appearance, personality traits, interests and most common activities. The indications cited by the respondents made it possible to create the following characteristics of the child:

The child is a young person, short in height and with no facial hair. They usually wear colourful clothes and have their favourite things. Above all, they enjoy playing: running, building, colouring, painting, playing games and watching cartoons. They go to a nursery, preschool or school.

The traits mentioned by the children can be split by contrast and division into:

- positive: *cheerful, calm, full of energy, kind, thoughtful, resourceful, colourful,*
- negative: *weird, mean, mischievous, aggressive.*

The cited positive traits refer to the creativity, vitality and energy that accompany childhood. Respondents held the perspective of a happy childhood, but when asked why they provided traits with a negative connotation, they described examples of peers they knew whose relationships were judged to be difficult and problematic.

Respondents also expressed opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of being a child. The results are presented in the form of the two tables below with a breakdown of the selected categories and sample statements.

Table 1. Advantages of being a child from the perspective of primary school students, grades 1–3

Category	Example statements
developmental characteristics (physical and intellectual fitness)	"One has a lot of energy" "It is possible to squeeze in somewhere where an adult would sort of not squeeze in; Your brain learns better than an adult brain"
rights and responsibilities	One does not have as many responsibilities as the parents. They are more concerned with work, work and such, they have a little less free time
time management	"You can play more and have more time to do your various things that you want than our parents" "I have a lot of free time" "Childhood is better than being an adult, because when you are a child, then you don't have to work" "Then one does not work and does not spend money on the household and things like that" "I don't have to work" "It's easier for you to plan something and then change the plan"
education	"I can go to school; I go to school"
relationships with others	"I have a lot of friends" "One has friends"
perspective on the future / source of memories	"Childhood is cool. Childhood is accompanied by cool memories; The cool thing is that your life is just beginning"

Source: Own study.

The students pointed out the many advantages of being a child, showing childhood as a period when high physical and intellectual fitness makes it possible to engage in various activities and learn much faster. A large part of the statements refers to comparisons of childhood and adulthood, in the mentioned cases to the advantage of being a child. Among others, they pointed to greater time resources and the associated flexibility in managing oneself over time, as well as no need to take on gainful employment and the resulting responsibility that falls on adults. The opinions of children who recognize the deeper dimension of childhood seem interesting, since they show childhood as a source of good memories or an outlook for the potential of their beginning life path.

Table 2. Disadvantages of being a child from the perspective of students, grades 1–3

Category	Example statements
dependence	"You can't go to the swimming pool or things like that by yourself" "A child cannot go to the store alone" "You can't go everywhere by yourself"
dependence on parents and their decisions	"The downside is that adults may not allow us to do something. For example, we would love to have some ice cream, and they won't let us, or our throat hurts, they do not allow us to eat that ice cream" "They forbid us to eat sweets" "Parents don't buy us what we want. For example, they don't let me buy a pocketknife" "They forbid us to buy toys" "When parents don't allow animals. . ." You can't decide what to do on which day"
limitations due to age barrier	"You can't drink alcohol, but I don't want to drink" "You can't drink beer" "You can't smoke" "You can't drive a car"
handicaps due to developmental characteristics	"The hard part is being short. You can't reach everywhere"

Source: Own study.

Responses regarding the difficulties or disadvantages of childhood are closely related to various types of shortages and dependence, especially as regards the ability to make autonomous decisions. Particularly frequently, students emphasized the role of parents as those refusing to let them buy certain items, own animals or eat certain foods. Statements about activities reserved exclusively for adults were also numerous, such as driving a car or drinking alcohol. Interestingly, some advantages seen by children are seen as a disadvantage by others. An example of a different way of thinking about the specifics of a child's situation is to see height as a factor in determining what places are accessible or inaccessible to children.

Research conclusions

The surveyed students in grades 1–3 portray the image of the child and childhood in a realistic way, taking into account their various aspects, perspectives and environmental conditions. They touch on the concept of a happy childhood, filled with leisure time that provides the impetus for a variety of activities and games. Respondents also cited examples that demonstrate their knowledge of children functioning in single-parent family conditions, facing limitations or disabilities. The interviewees were eager to point out different ways of thinking about the child and show the advantages and

disadvantages of childhood. The children's statements often reveal their beliefs built on their own rich experiences. Many times the thoughts were supported by examples from everyday life. The students show a high awareness of their rights and the essential role of adults in providing appropriate conditions for all-round development.

The research results give a similar perspective of the child and childhood, where "children are a group or social category that takes action and creates its biography in a specific interpersonal space. Experiencing childhood is a process that takes place in the field of reciprocal relations, to which children give a special (distinctive) meaning. Childhood is associated with the state of being a child, but in the children's statements it appears as a more abstract concept and mainly in relation to adulthood" (Ornacka, 2011).

The students under study did not fully address the relationships that exist between children and parents or other people involved in their lives (other family members, peers or teachers), so it seems reasonable to deepen the research in the direction of showing the children's perspective of the relationships that they establish with others in the family and school environment. Their reflections on daily life and the quality of interactions can contribute to a better understanding of children's social functioning.

In lieu of a summary

Childhood is an extraordinary time in an individual's life, crucial for full and comprehensive development. As S. Guz rightly notes: "Nowadays, it is believed that a good childhood, passing in conditions promoting the harmonious development of the child, is an invaluable asset that the child brings into adult life" (2018, p. 97). In order to shape and develop correct social attitudes towards the child and childhood, the children's perspective should be taken into account—their opinions and experiences which make it possible to identify areas for further analysis and consideration, as well as specific actions to improve the quality of childhood. Finding out more about the children's perceptions is of particular importance because, as one respondent points out:

"No one knows us more than we know ourselves" (Lidia, age 8).

Therefore, instead of a classic summary, I find it particularly valuable to quote a statement by one of the respondents (a girl), which takes the form of an appeal to adults:

"In my opinion, adults should not tell children, for example, that something does not exist, because children should have dreams and believe in magic, have their own

dreams and decide for themselves whether they believe in something or not. Not that a parent will say, for example, "Don't believe in unicorns, because they don't exist. Have you ever seen them?", because this is not true and, for example, unicorns can also exist, for example, because someone does not see them. So, things like that should not be said." (Kaja, age 8)

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