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ADULT-CENTERED CONSTRUCTIONS OF CHILDHOOD AND CHILDREN'S WORLDVIEWS: EDUCATIONAL, CULTURAL AND ARTISTIC PERSPECTIVES

ABSTRACT

This article examines the tension between adult-centered constructions of childhood and children's own worldviews within educational, cultural and artistic contexts. The main aim of the study is to challenge the dominant tendency to interpret childhood exclusively through adult-defined social norms and to foreground children's agency, perception and lived experience as essential analytical categories. To achieve this aim, the study pursues several objectives: to analyze historical and theoretical perspectives on childhood; to investigate how children are positioned within modern educational systems; to explore representations of children's worldviews in literary and artistic works; and to identify the gap between the legal recognition of children's rights and their practical realization in education.

The research employs a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology, combining historical-cultural analysis, qualitative textual analysis and comparative-interpretive approaches. Literary texts, poetry, manga, animation and film are examined as cultural forms that articulate children's perspectives often excluded from institutional educational discourse. In addition, the study considers the educational implications of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified in 1994 by both Japan and Uzbekistan, with particular attention to how children's rights to participation and expression are implemented in practice.

The findings demonstrate that, despite

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BOLALIK VA BOLALAR DUNYOQARASHI KATTALAR NIGOHIDA: TA'LIMIY, MADANIY HAMDA IJODIY ISTIQBOLLAR

ANNOTATSIYA

Mazkur maqolada bolalik tushunchasining kattalar nigohida shakllangan talqinlari hamda bolalarning o‘ziga xos dunyoqarashi o‘rtasidagi qarama-qarshilik ta'limiy, madaniy va badiiy kontekstlarda tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqotning asosiy maqsadi bolalikni faqat kattalar tomonidan belgilangan ijtimoiy me'yorlar asosida emas, balki bolalarning mustaqil tajribasi, idroki va agentligi nuqtayi nazaridan yoritishdan iborat. Ushbu maqsadga erishish uchun quyidagi vazifalar belgilandi: bolalik haqidagi tarixiy va nazariy qarashlarni tahlil qilish; ta'lim tizimida bolalarning qanday subyekt sifatida tasavvur qilinishini aniqlash; badiiy va madaniy matnlarda bolalar dunyoqarashining ifodalanish shakllarini ochib berish; bolalar huquqlarining huquqiy tan olinishi bilan amaliy ta'lim tajribasi o‘rtasidagi tafovutni aniqlash.

Tadqiqot metodologiyasi sifatida tarixiy-madaniy tahlil, sifatli matn tahlili hamda qiyosiy-interpretativ yondashuvlardan foydalanildi. Adabiyot, she'riyat, manga, animatsiya va kino kabi badiiy shakllar bolalarning dunyoni idrok etish usullarini ochib beruvchi muhim manbalar sifatida tahlil qilindi. Shuningdek, Yaponiya va O‘zbekiston tomonidan 1994 yilda ratifikatsiya qilingan "Bola huquqlari to‘g‘risidagi konvensiya" ta'limiy amaliyotlar bilan bog‘liq holda muhokama qilindi.

Tadqiqot natijalari shuni ko‘rsatadiki, zamonaviy ta'lim tizimlarida bolalar huquqiy jihatdan tan olingan bo‘lsa-da, amalda ular ko‘pincha bilimni passiv qabul qiluvchi

formal recognition of children as rights-bearing individuals, contemporary educational systems continue to treat children primarily as passive recipients of instruction rather than as active agents of meaning-making. Artistic representations, by contrast, depict children as complex and autonomous subjects whose worldviews are marked by paradoxical qualities such as innocence and cruelty, imagination and violence, vulnerability and resilience. These portrayals challenge idealized adult images of childhood and expose the limitations of adult-centric pedagogical assumptions.

The article concludes that understanding children as full human beings with distinct modes of perception is essential for rethinking education and cultural representation. Recognizing children's agency not only enriches childhood studies but also calls for more reflexive, inclusive and ethically responsible educational practices.

Key words: children's perception, innocence and cruelty, childhood, children's literature, poetry, adults, children's rights.

obyekt sifatida qaraladi. Badiiy asarlar esa bolalarni murakkab, mustaqil va qarama-qarshi xususiyatlarga ega mavjudot sifatida tasvirlab, kattalar markazidagi bolalik talqinlarini shubha ostiga qo'yadi.

Xulosa qilib aytganda, maqola bolalarni "yetilmagan kattalar" sifatida emas, balki o'ziga xos dunyoqarash va tajribaga ega bo'lgan to'laqonli insonlar sifatida anglash zarurligini asoslaydi hamda ta'lim va madaniyatda bolalar agentligini tan olish muhimligini ta'kidlaydi.

Kalit so'zlar: bolalar haqidagi tasavvurlar, beg'uborlik va shafqatsizlik, bolalik, bolalar adabiyoti, she'riyat, kattalar, bolalar huquqlari.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most pressing social issues in contemporary Japan is the declining fertility rate, which has led to a sustained decline in population. This demographic shift has attracted considerable international attention and is frequently featured in global media. While Japan experienced rapid population growth during its modernization, the trend reversed in 2008 and has since continued to decline [Vital Statistics of Japan, 2023]. Japan is not unique in this regard; total fertility rates (TFR) below the replacement level of 2.1 have become a global norm. Countries exceeding a TFR of 2.1 are now concentrated primarily in Africa, with some Muslim-majority nations also maintaining higher levels. Even in many of these regions, however, fertility rates are gradually declining.

Although numerous factors contribute to declining fertility, the present study does not seek to analyze their causes or propose policy interventions. Instead, it examines how demographic change influences our perception of children—specifically, the kinds of beings we imagine them to be. The image adults hold of "children" is far from universal, varying substantially across historical periods and cultural contexts.

In the 20th century, French historian Philippe Ariès famously argued that "children," as a distinct social category, did not exist in medieval Europe; instead, they were regarded as miniature adults. A comparable representation can be found in a painting housed in the Amur Temur Museum in Uzbekistan. The figure, apparently a child holding what resembles a toy horse, bears facial features indistinguishable from those of an adult —precisely the kind of portrayal Ariès identified in European art of

the Middle Ages.

A painting displayed in the State Museum of the History of the Timurids ("Temuriylar tarixi davlat muzeyi"). While the artist is undoubtedly a contemporary painter, the work exhibits features similar to those found in medieval European paintings. This resemblance, whether coincidental or intentional, provides a noteworthy example for considering cultural conceptions of childhood.

In Japan, the expression *hannin-mae* (literally, "half a person") refers to someone who lacks the competence or maturity of a fully developed adult. Within this framework, children are generally perceived as lacking the skills and experiences necessary to function as independent members of society. Consequently, childhood is often conceptualized as merely a preparatory stage on the path to adulthood, a period that must be surpassed to be recognized as a "full" person. This perception reinforces the notion that children are incomplete human beings—unfinished versions of adults. Even as the modern discourse on human rights emerged and expanded, children were initially excluded from it only after women achieved recognition as rights-bearing individuals did children begin to be acknowledged in similar terms.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989, was ratified by both Japan and Uzbekistan in 1994. Accordingly, 2024 marks the 30th anniversary of its ratification in both countries. In Japan, however, the Convention initially encountered resistance. Critics argued that overemphasizing children's rights could weaken their sense of responsibility or undermine respect for adults and teachers. Reflecting this tension, Japan's Juvenile Law was revised in 2007 in a more punitive direction.

In recent years, educational discourse in Japan has begun to shift. Children are increasingly viewed not merely as passive recipients of instruction but as active participants in their own learning processes. This development prompts fundamental questions about what it means to nurture children in ways that are both healthy and meaningful. The present study traces historical transformations in adult perceptions

of children and critically examines the assumptions embedded in our understanding of "childhood." In doing so, it focuses particularly on representations of children's nature and subjectivity in cultural media, including literature, manga, animation, and film.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary research design that integrates historical-cultural analysis with literary and visual text interpretation. The methodological framework is informed by childhood studies, cultural theory and educational research, allowing for a nuanced examination of how adult-centered constructions of childhood contrast with children's own worldviews across different cultural and artistic contexts.

The historical-cultural method is employed to trace the evolution of adult perceptions of childhood from premodern to contemporary periods. Drawing on key theoretical contributions in the social history of childhood, this approach situates changing images of children within broader social, religious and educational transformations. Particular attention is given to the institutionalization of schooling and its role in shaping adult authority over children, as well as to the legal recognition of children's rights following the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Japan and Uzbekistan.

The study utilizes qualitative textual analysis to examine literary and artistic representations of childhood. Selected texts from literature, poetry, manga, animation and film are analyzed as cultural narratives that articulate children's perspectives in ways often absent from formal educational discourse. The selection of these works is based on their explicit focus on children as central figures and on their capacity to reveal alternative modes of perception, agency and emotional complexity. The analysis attends to narrative structure, imagery, symbolism and thematic patterns that foreground children's autonomy or expose tensions between adult authority and child subjectivity.

The comparative interpretive approach is applied to identify recurring contrasts between adult-centered and child-centered representations across cultural contexts. Rather than seeking exhaustive comparison, the study focuses on conceptual parallels that illuminate how childhood is framed differently by adults and by children themselves. This method enables the identification of shared patterns—such as the coexistence of innocence and cruelty, dependence and resistance—while remaining sensitive to cultural specificity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Adults' Perceptions of Children

1.1 The Ariès Shock

The French historian Philippe Ariès sparked considerable debate by claiming that "children did not exist in medieval Europe." According to Ariès, what we now take for granted—a distinct period of "childhood" occupied by beings called "children"—was absent in earlier times. Although his theory is no longer universally accepted, it

continues to shape scholarly thinking about the social construction of childhood.

In Japan as well, children—regardless of age—were often regarded primarily as sources of labor. Whether in domestic service or agricultural work, they were expected to enter society immediately and acquire skills alongside adults. The Japanese term *hannin-mae* encapsulates this notion: it describes someone whose abilities are not yet fully developed, and thus not yet a complete human being. This suggests that children were long perceived as incomplete members of humanity, evaluated against adult norms.

In more ancient societies, infanticide or child abandonment was often practiced to preserve a household's standard of living. Shiomi and Nagao [Shiomi & Nagano, 2005, p.79] note: "In low-productivity ancient societies, a child's survival was tolerated only within the limits of what could be supported by the family. In times of economic hardship, infanticide or abandonment was routinely practiced to reduce the number of mouths to feed." Such practices reflect a perception of children as subordinate to adults, kept only when economically feasible. Similar population-control measures occurred in historical Japan, where the taboo practice of *mabiki* ("thinning out") was carried out in the name of economic survival.

Ariès's contribution lies in articulating how the child–adult relationship has changed over time. To speak about children, then, is simultaneously to define them in contrast to the adults who frame their existence.

Later, under the influence of Christianity, Roman emperors enacted policies prohibiting child abandonment and infanticide, offering aid to impoverished households as a preventive measure. In Japan, a comparable concern for the vulnerable appears in institutions such as Hiden'in, an early welfare facility said to have been established by Prince Shōtoku at Shitennō-ji Temple in Osaka, grounded in Buddhist thought. The name survives today in the district of Hiden'in-chō.

Toyoshima [Toyoshima, 2016], who studied abortion practices in premodern Japan—specifically during the Edo period—notes that people once believed children "belonged to the realm of the gods" until the age of seven. The idea of "returning a child to the gods" reflects a distinctive perception of childhood in which very young children were not yet seen as fully part of human society but as sacred beings.

This view is also evident in the old Japanese saying *shichi-sai made wa kami no uchi* ("Until age seven, children belong to the gods"). Shwalb and colleagues [Shwalb & Chen, 1996; Shwalb et al., 2003] conducted comparative research on how Japanese and American parents interpret this proverb. Interestingly, American parents were more likely to feel that the saying retains relevance today, reflecting a view of children as pure and innocent.

In Japan, however, the expression may have served as a psychological defense against high infant mortality—allowing bereaved parents to believe the child was never truly theirs to lose. In contrast, in American contexts, children are typically not considered morally responsible until around age seven or eight, an age associated with the emergence of reason. Notably, in ancient Greece, child-rearing also began at age seven, when boys were taken from their mothers and subjected to rigorous training as

future soldiers [Fujii, 2013]. Across these examples, children came to be recognized as full members of society only after passing through an early, vulnerable phase—without the prolonged "childhood" of the modern sense, but rather as "small adults" expected to learn life's ways alongside their elders.

1.2 Counterarguments and Alternative Perspectives

The ripple effects of Ariès's theory are no longer accepted uncritically. For example, in response to his assertion that "the discovery of childhood" was a modern development, Ono [Ono, 2019] offers a broader perspective by examining Islamic jurisprudence. He shows that even in premodern societies outside Europe, such as within the Islamic legal tradition, children were recognized as socially and legally distinct from adults. This challenges the Eurocentric framing of childhood history.

Similarly, in examining perceptions of childhood in Judaism, Katsumata [Katsumata, 2014] argues that children were not merely viewed as individuals, but as sacred beings essential to the continuity of the Jewish people across generations. This view is grounded in a deep religious insight: although immature, children are imbued with immeasurable potential. Such a perspective underscores their indispensable role in the community's collective identity.

In the context of medieval Europe, Iwasaki and Tozawa [Iwasaki &Tozawa, 2002] analyze both proponents and critics of Ariès, revealing a divergence between two interpretations: one claiming that high infant mortality led to emotional detachment from young children, and another contending that infants were received with special joy and emotional investment. These contrasting views highlight the complexity and variability of attitudes toward children even within a single cultural-historical setting.

Komi [Komi, 2021] also challenges conventional narratives by exploring Jesus's view of children. According to Komi, Jesus's perception of childhood differed markedly from prevailing Greco-Roman and Jewish attitudes of the time. Rather than regarding children merely as immature beings, he recognized their inherent dignity and capacity for self-development. Consequently, adults—as caregivers—were called not to control or dominate, but to respect children's autonomy and support their growth. This theological stance suggests that Christian childcare was not merely about transmitting customs but rested on a coherent child-centered philosophy of care—one that continues to inform its mission in contemporary society.

Further critique of Ariès comes from Tsuda [Tsuda, 2000], who questions the age range he had in mind by "children." Focusing on neonates, Tsuda observes that the treatment of newborns changed markedly before and after the modern period. Although biologically classified as children, newborns differ so profoundly from older children that they have often been excluded from the very concept of "childhood." This observation is highly suggestive for future studies on childhood as a socially constructed category.

Finally, Yuyama [Yuyama, 2020] emphasizes the value of pictorial sources in comparative research between Japan and China to advance a social history of childhood in Asia. In a field still dominated by Western European perspectives, such regionally grounded approaches are indeed much needed.

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2. Is Childhood Merely a Preparation for Adulthood?

2.1 A New Perception of Childhood

Fujii [Fujii, 2013] argues that the emergence of the modern notion of "children" was closely tied to the transformation of information transmission—from oral to written language. Unlike spoken language, which is acquired naturally through social interaction, written language—i.e., reading and writing—requires systematic instruction. This shift created a clear demarcation between adults and children: literate adults possessed knowledge inaccessible to illiterate children, thereby producing informational asymmetry. Excluded from this new realm of literacy, children came to occupy a distinct stage of life—a prolonged phase during which they gradually acquired reading and writing skills. In this way, "childhood" as we understand it today took shape.

With the advent of industrial society, a basic level of education became a prerequisite for labor. The "little adults" of earlier times now had to acquire the skills necessary for future participation in society. Consequently, children came to be distinguished from adults as individuals requiring a dedicated period of education. Schools were established as institutional spaces where children learned literacy and numeracy. Literacy facilitated engagement with the rapidly expanding written media, while numeracy met the demands of an increasingly monetized and market-oriented economy. These competencies became indispensable not only for employment but also for daily life.

From the perspective of educated adults, children were seen as ignorant and inexperienced, in need of both instruction and protection. Under the banner of "education" and "protection," children were segregated into school life—solidifying a new adult–child relationship. If Fujii's analysis holds, the literacy-based distinction between adults and children may gradually erode in an age where literacy is no longer essential for accessing information, as in the visual and digital environments of television and the internet. In such contexts, adults can no longer control children's access to information, and the once-stable boundaries have grown increasingly porous.

Japan's modern perception of childhood, however, did not arise solely from Western influence or educational reform. Motomori [Motomori, 2012] contends that it developed incrementally, shaped by socio-economic complexities and, in particular, by conflicts between capitalists and educators over factory labor. In another study, Motomori [Motomori, 2019] critically examines traditional performing arts in provincial Japan from the perspective of child labor. He argues that the modern perception of childhood cannot be reduced to a narrative of protection and progress; it must also encompass elements of discrimination and exclusion. This perspective calls for a reassessment of the intricate historical construction of childhood.

Adults who had received a primary education occupied a hierarchical position over illiterate children. Since the grammar and arithmetic they had learned remained constant, adults naturally assumed the role of instructors to the ignorant child. The "little adults" awaiting maturity were now recast as "children to be educated,"

reinforcing a vertical gradient in the adult–child relationship. This allowed adults to view children from a position of superiority.

Yet when the media shifted from text to images, this hierarchy collapsed. The rules and grammar that had governed communication lost their authority in the visual domain. While adults lamented their helplessness, children navigated the emerging media world with intuition and agility. As children and youth gained cultural advantage, the spread of computer technology cemented the generational shift. Kazuko Honda analyzes American educational theorist Neil Postman's provocative claim that "childhood is disappearing." The following passage from her study [Honda, 2000] illustrates this shift:

Children and young people, unrestricted by conventional frameworks, enthusiastically explore the digital world, driven by curiosity. While adults observe this screen-mediated world with suspicion and bewilderment, the center of media has definitively shifted to the computer. Even the everyday world can no longer unfold apart from it. Many adults of the preceding generation now find themselves overtaken by the younger generation. The traditional relationship—between the 'knower' and the 'learner,' the 'teacher' and the 'taught'—is disintegrating before their eyes. (p.190)

Once the figure of the "child" emerged, adults were compelled to recognize it—yet such recognition has always been mediated by the dominant paradigms of its time and has never been straightforward. The awareness that children experience and perceive the world differently from adults is, in fact, relatively recent. Ellen Key, the Swedish philosopher, famously designated the 20th century as "the century of the child," marking a significant shift from adult-centeredness to child-centeredness. Yet as we progress through the 21st century, this once-prominent center appears to have quietly receded from view.

3. The Century of the Child

1.1 *Children of Science*

Ellen Key, who famously designated the 20th century as *"The Century of the Child,"* appeared to place absolute faith in science as an authority that would supplant the divine. Among the many influences on her thinking, eugenics played a particularly significant role: children were regarded as symbols of evolution and progress. This equation—*evolution = value*—translated into *children = value,* elevating them as hopeful bearers of humanity's radiant future. Once "discovered," children were no longer viewed merely in contrast to adults but as inherently valuable beings in their own right. It was believed that the scientific study of children could enable error-free education. This pursuit spurred the quantification of children through IQ tests and deviation scores, fostering a trend toward understanding them in numerical terms.

In education, especially, reliance on quantitative data prevailed. Children came to be represented and understood as numerical entities, with these figures lending an aura of objectivity and driving systems of classification and hierarchy. Ultimately, even their educational trajectories were determined by numbers.

Advances in medicine also contributed to a dramatic decline in infant mortality. The era of high birth and death rates gave way to the emergence of the "child who

does not die." Science dispelled the mysteries surrounding pregnancy and childbirth with remarkable speed. Free love and marriage began to be viewed as means of achieving better reproduction and superior genetic inheritance. Shiomi observes that while children in the West are often strictly disciplined, Japanese culture—shaped by the idea of children as *"treasures"*—tends to be more lenient. However, children were no longer perceived as beings to be *"blessed with"* but rather as entities to be *"produced."* Today, eugenics is widely condemned and has largely disappeared from public discourse. Yet, the prevailing notion of "producing children" rather than "being blessed with them" is unmistakable, as reflected in the decline of the latter expression.

Technological development now ensures the health and safety of children with overwhelming power. Hospitals and physicians manage children's illnesses, while educational specialists and psychologists oversee their development. As a result, the caregiving capacities of parents and communities have weakened. When children engage in delinquency, schools are often the first to be blamed; in cases of death, hospitals are held accountable. These tendencies suggest a near-total transfer of responsibility from parents to institutions. Although irresponsible parental behavior frequently draws media attention, criticizing their lack of accountability yields little value in the current context surrounding children.

3.2 Children of Ideology

In Japan, the so-called *"Century of the Child"* became a prime arena for ideological contestation, and children were drawn into a tug-of-war over ideological influence. The question was how to mold the ideal child—presumed pure and innocent—into the perfect embodiment of adult ideals and expectations. Enlightenment thinkers eagerly projected their visions of the future onto the untainted minds of children. Following the Meiji Restoration, Japan sought to build a strong nation under the ideology of *"rising in the world,"* urging children to be diligent. Statues of Ninomiya Sontoku, depicted reading while carrying firewood on his back, inspired children to aspire to education and self-improvement.

In contrast, the Taishō-era liberal movement embraced democracy and idealized childhood innocence as a source of value. The children's literature magazine *Akai Tori (Red Bird)* epitomized this trend, regarding childlike sensibilities as the essence of humanity. Opposing this was the proletarian movement, which dismissed such abstract notions of "childishness". It emphasized the need to open children's eyes to social realities, preparing them as future members of the working class.

According to Kazuko Honda, each of these ideologies focused on children's *"childlikeness,"* projecting onto it their hopes and ideals:

Children's inherent childlikeness was entrusted with immense trust and expectation as a potential vessel for ideological faith. Each ideology eagerly employed children as embodiments of its ideals, attempting to identify a unique "child's heart" distinct from that of adults and to envision in it the realization of its doctrines. [Honda, 2000, p. 110]

• Under the ideology of Imperial Japan during World War II, the education system was fully mobilized to instill militaristic values. These policies extended even

into children's recreational lives, shaping them into fearless warriors. After the war, although fascism retreated from education, the system of enclosing children within the framework of school life—along with ambitions for social advancement—remained intact. Today, vigilance is required regarding government educational policies and textbook selection, precisely because schools wield such absolute control over children. By controlling schools, one can effectively control children.

3.*3 Enclosed Childhood*

Schools were established as mechanisms for mass-producing adults suited to an industrialized society. In modern societies, the equation *"child = student"* has become a rigid norm. Kindergartens and daycare centers, though not formally schools, serve the same function of enclosure. Honda refers to this as *"the emergence of benevolent ghettos."* Parents, believing that home-based child-rearing is outdated or uneducational, compete for kindergarten admission. The once-relaxed and optimistic approach to child-rearing—letting children play freely with neighborhood kids and idle adults—has nearly vanished.

Nonetheless, recent surveys on attitudes toward children reveal traces of lingering pastoral optimism. Sugino [Sugino, 2018] reports that university students hope children will be cheerful and healthy, live fulfilling lives, and grow socially through empathy and interaction with others. Such sentiments are believed to contribute to children's happiness.

Thanks to medical advancements, society has shifted from a high-birth/high-death to a low-birth/low-death demographic pattern. Parents are now more willing to invest in their children, who are no longer valued primarily for labor or future caregiving, but as sources of joy and brightness within families [Tomo, 2005].

Motomori [Motomori, 2021] contends that European childhood sociology is moving beyond the traditional-new perception dichotomy. He identifies three currents in contemporary childhood studies:

1.In education, a shift away from adult-centered, "educational" perspectives toward those adopting the child's own viewpoint and focusing on peer cultures, viewing the child's world as a kind of *"foreign culture"* that offers critical reflection on adult society.

2.In history and anthropology, an emphasis on the idea that educational perceptions of children are not universal but historically and culturally contingent.

3.In empirical research, an effort to describe children's actual consciousness and social worlds through surveys and studies, minimizing adult projections.

• Despite these developments, schools continue to exert overwhelming power in enclosing children, resulting in the decline of parenting and community-based caregiving. *"Good education"* is now equated with encounters with ideal schools and teachers, while parents lacking a sense of responsibility tend to shift their children entirely onto the school system. This aversion to hands-on child-rearing is not limited to parents but is echoed in communities as well. Contemporary social issues involving children reflect a reality in which parents and communities feel powerless and increasingly transfer the burden to schools and the state.

In today's society, children are no longer companions in everyday life but beings to be enclosed elsewhere. Mothers who spend all day caring for their children are vulnerable to burnout, neurosis, or even abuse. This may be regarded as one of the negative legacies of the school-based enclosures promoted during the so-called *"Century of the Child."*

4. Children's Worldviews

4.1 Worlds Portrayed in Artistic Works

Having examined how adults' perceptions of children have transformed, we now turn to the worldviews held by children themselves. These perspectives reveal images of children as beings distinct from adults—worlds imagined by children that diverge from those conceived by adults.

• Biologically, all children are destined to become adults—none remain children forever. Whether boys or girls, they will inevitably grow into fully developed human beings. But why must children become adults? The answer is that children cannot reproduce. If they could, there would be no biological imperative for them to reach adulthood, nor would adults themselves be necessary. From the viewpoint that childhood is merely a preparatory stage for adulthood, this idea may seem absurd. Yet such a proposition unsettles the adult-centric belief that "true humanity resides in adulthood."

The late Kazuo Umezu, a brilliant creator who passed away in 2024, explored worlds devoid of adults in works such as *Fourteen*, *My Name Is Shingo*, and *The Drifting Classroom*. These narratives present starkly different worlds from a child's perspective. In his final work, *Fourteen*, humanity is depicted as surviving only until age fourteen, leaving children to persist in an unforgiving world without adult guidance. The absence of adults may reflect a child's fantasy: though aware of adult protection, they might still wonder how thrilling life would be without constant control. Yet in *The Drifting Classroom*, the absence of adults reveals that children not only survive but also organize societies as competently as adults.

In *My Name Is Shingo*, perhaps Umezu's most complex and philosophical work, children create another child—a theme intertwined with early explorations of artificial intelligence in the 1980s. These works radically subvert adult-centered narratives, yet their surreal and eccentric nature often alienates adult readers. In Umezu's universe, children are not mere objects of protection or seclusion; the world is rendered entirely through a child's lens.

• This child-centered perspective is also evident in J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* and in the poetry of Japanese lyricists like Yaso Saijō. For instance, Yamamori [Yamamori, 2006] references Saijō's "Chō" (*Butterfly*) and Hakushū Kitahara's "Kingyo" (*Goldfish*) as examples. Such perspectives are rare; children's literature often feels nostalgic yet incomprehensible to adult readers, evoking a sense of longing or melancholy. As Saint-Exupéry [1953] observed in the dedication of *The Little Prince*, most adults have forgotten that they were once children. The book dramatizes the adult's re-encounter with a lost worldview in the face of mortality. Although all

adults were once children, many forget and grow indifferent toward them.

Hishida [Hishida, 2006] notes that late 19th-century children's literature often portrayed children as uncanny or enigmatic beings. Kiyama and Terakawa [Kiyama & Terakawa, 2019] cite Hayao Miyazaki's *My Neighbor Totoro* as another example. The story revolves around the idea that "children can see Totoro," emphasizing their unique emotional and perceptual worlds. As the theme song puts it: "A mysterious encounter that visits only in childhood." Kiyama and Terakawa suggest these perceptions stem from unexplored domains of children's minds or neurological functioning.

Arakawa [Arakawa, 2007], analyzing the film *Nobody Knows*, critiques society's fixation on the image of the "innocent child." This obsession, he argues, closes our eyes to children's real-life struggles and vitality. The film is based on an actual case in Japan in which four abandoned siblings inadvertently caused the death of their youngest member.

Traces of this new child-centric worldview can be found even in *The Wizard of Oz*. Yoshida [Yoshida, 2018] interprets the story as a departure from traditional, fear-based moral tales toward one that celebrates children's joy, agency, and autonomy. Children are no longer depicted as obedient followers of adults. Umezu pushed this further by weaving brutal horror into his works—drawing children in with fear, yet consistently portraying them as protagonists entirely distinct from adults. He remains a rare artist who consistently placed children at the center of his creations.

4.2. Off to Neverland: A World of Innocence and Cruelty

In his book *Postwar History of Views on Children*, Nomoto argues that postwar democratic education aimed to nurture autonomous and independent children. He highlights this through several fascinating poems written by children that embody this ideal of self-directed expression [Nomoto, 2007].

Tajima (as cited in Nomoto, 2007, p. 234) presents the following poem:

Eyeballs
Bulging eyeballs,
Yuck.
That's it—
Let's gather everyone's eyeballs.
Big eyeballs,
Small eyeballs,
Mari-chan's eyeballs were big.
Hosono-san's eyeballs were narrow.
Yuko-san's eyeballs were cute.
Let's take the teacher's eyeballs too—
Heave-ho, squish-squish.
Altogether, I gathered forty-nine.
Sold them to Miwa Hospital,
A hundred yen each,
Four thousand nine hundred yen in total. *(AI-generated translation)*

Children's capacity for cruelty is perhaps one of the most significant reasons

adults find them incomprehensible. As is well known, Peter Pan's recklessness is baffling and even disturbingly cruel [Barrie, 1911]. In manga artist Kyosuke Usuta's works—particularly *Pyuu to Fuku! Jaguar*, where the protagonist, Jaguar Junichi, is styled after The Little Prince, complete with a distinctive costume and long scarf—we see characters engaging in unpredictable, bizarre behavior. This evokes what could be called Peter Pan's essence—retaining a state of 'childishness' far beyond the expected age, blending humor with unhesitating cruelty.

Unlike the cruelty committed by adults, children's cruelty often involves death directly. In their minds, inconvenient things are sometimes eliminated most directly—by death. Peter Pan's adventures frequently include acts of killing. Even *The Little Prince*, a seemingly gentle story, has the prince choosing death. In Kazuo Umezu's *God's Left Hand, Devil's Right Hand*, elementary school students kill their kind teacher to test a rumor that one's true nature is revealed in their death face. The event unfolds without solemnity, marked by impulsiveness and eerie calm.

A similar motif appears in *Kojiki*, the oldest surviving book in Japan, where Yamato Takeru kills his brother merely for not attending a meal. To modern sensibilities, such actions are abrupt and disturbingly violent. While these behaviors may seem deeply incomprehensible and cruel, they may in fact reflect latent aspects of human nature—brought to light in children and in ancient worldviews alike.

However, we must not forget that identifying something as "cruel" might stem from our adult perspective. Kitahara Hakushu's poem *Goldfish* was criticized for its cruelty. Still, as Yamaguchi [2008] explains, Hakushu argued that it is harmful for adults to conceal or distort children's inherently pure behaviors for the sake of moral instruction. According to Yamaori, Kitahara wrote:

I do not affirm cruelty itself. Rather, such cruelty is merely one form of children's vitality, and in itself is beauty and poetry. To view it as evil is to apply impure adult morality. [Yamamori, 2006, p. 204]

This suggests a stark divergence in perception between children and adults. Adults who fear death and cling to life may not share children's perspectives. Though it is now common knowledge that children and adults have different cognition, as recently as a century ago, children were considered miniature adults. The realization that children think and feel in fundamentally different ways was revolutionary [Sugioka, 1994, p.24].

The parental wish for their child to become a "decent human being" may be perplexing to the child, because they don't understand what that means, nor do parents successfully explain it [Shiomi & Nagao, 2005, p.35]. While everyone was once a child, imagining a child's cognitive limitations remains difficult. As Froebel noted, children, like "nursing infants," absorb everything given to them by adults. Even if adults feel they cannot understand children, they must not conclude that children cannot understand them. Rather than trying to force understanding unilaterally, adults should trust in children's capabilities and strive for mutual engagement.

5. Children's Rights

As we have seen, the historical transformation of views on children [e.g., Hayashi, 1997] reflects a shift from perceiving children as "miniature adults" in the medieval period to viewing them as beings in need of protection in the modern era. Since the 1970s, children have increasingly been recognized as fundamentally different from adults, with growing emphasis on independence and autonomy. This change is rooted in the understanding that children are subjects who possess rights.

While the media occasionally reports shocking crimes committed by minors, the reality is that cases in which adults kill children far outnumber those in which children kill adults. Nevertheless, such events are reported by adults, for adults, and within an adult-centered society—one in which children are largely excluded from public discourse. In such a society, it is far from easy to respect children's rights as if they were already fully realized human beings. Kobayashi [Kobayashi, 1999, p. 227] writes:

Children are born with fundamental human rights. Yet, throughout history, the period when this was not even considered far outweighs the period when it was.

• He calls upon adults to take it as their mission to establish and uphold these rights.

As noted earlier, the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989 and ratified by Japan in 1994. Although this move was widely welcomed, some expressed reservations. Sugioka [Sugioka, 199] highlighted the opposition between two prevailing views regarding the Convention and pointed out a shared problem: both perspectives presuppose a fixed image of children and education—that is, assumptions about what children are and how education ought to be.

Evaluations of the Ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

Proponents of Active Endorsement	Cautious or Skeptical Views
Respecting children's opinions and granting them freedom, even if they are still immature, is essential to ensuring their best interests.	Because of children's immaturity, adult protection and guidance are crucial. Granting certain freedom rights—such as the right to express opinions—may disrupt school education and ultimately do more harm than good.

Sugioka further argues that in today's world, no particular image of children or educational philosophy retains the persuasive power it once did. Nonetheless, when unexamined assumptions are imposed uncritically on real children, serious problems arise. Hirano [Hirano, 2006] warns that children are increasingly absorbed into the adult world for the sake of adult convenience. The very concept of "childhood" is at risk of disappearing, and children are once again becoming "miniature adults." Through an analysis of adult–child relationships in *Pinocchio*, he calls for an approach rooted not in legalistic regulation but in responsibility toward children, advocating a reformation of how we perceive them.

How do children come to know that Japan has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child? And how can they appeal when their rights are violated? In reality,

just as adults ratified the Convention, it is also adults who must bear responsibility for protecting those rights. Takiguchi [Takiguchi, 2017] classifies children's rights into four categories: the right to survival, the right to protection, the right to development, and the right to participation. Japanese administrative systems tend to view children primarily as "objects of protection" rather than as "autonomous subjects." His criticism—that this institutional perspective hinders meaningful progress even after ratification—deserves serious consideration.

The modern concept of childhood recognized children both as subjects of education—beings to be shaped into valuable members of society—and as rights-bearing individuals entitled to survival and education [Kiyama & Terakawa, 2019]. Ideally, both aspects should coexist. Yet in practice, the adult gaze remains dominant in all areas. For this reason, the writers and works discussed earlier, which attempt to depict the world from a child's perspective, are invaluable and deserve close attention. Whether children are truly treated as human beings is a question that requires constant self-reflection and vigilance on the part of adults. Criticizing or regulating ourselves is never easy. But it is not the adults who suffer from our negligence—it is the children.

One reason children's rights are often neglected is that investments in them take decades to yield visible results. The benefits of child-rearing policies or educational reforms usually become apparent only years later. As Sugioka [Sugioka, 1994, p. 54] observes:

Adults tend to understand children's development from an adult's point of view. They expect children to grow into what adults consider ideal. But actual child development should be about increasing naturally and spontaneously in ways that are true to the child. To allow this, adults must take responsibility for *waiting* for children to grow and for *engaging appropriately* with them.

CONCLUSION

Compared with premodern views of childhood, the modern tendency to celebrate childlikeness as a symbol of innocence represents a dramatic and welcome transformation. Yet such a view remains fragile and subject to change. It is premature to resist the expansion of children's rights. Our current perception of children is of very recent origin; rather than opposing change, we should first affirm their full rights and then engage in deliberate and informed debate. To diminish their status because they require adult protection is not only counterproductive but fundamentally unjust.

Historically, before children were enclosed within institutionalized education, the wisdom of humanity was likely transmitted in subtle and organic ways. Living alongside adults, children absorbed knowledge and values through shared physical and emotional experiences. Today, however, they spend much of their "childhood" within peer groups. Intergenerational knowledge must now be passed on through intentional and structured efforts, placing considerable responsibility on educational institutions. These institutions are tasked with designing and implementing programs that fulfill this role—a responsibility arguably heavier than any previously borne by humanity.

Yet it remains difficult for adults to see the world as children do. At best, we may catch fleeting glimpses of that world through the works of rare and exceptional artists. Children possess worldviews fundamentally distinct from those of adults, interpreting their experiences through unique lenses. Their behavior can appear incomprehensible; attempts at interpretation may leave us frustrated with Peter Pan's choices, abandoned by the Little Prince, or even absent from a child's perceptual field.

When engaging with children, it is insufficient merely to acknowledge their elusiveness. We must approach them with respect—as equal human beings. For educators, understanding should begin with recognizing the inherent dignity, which forms the foundation for any meaningful relationship with children.

Appendix

Goldfish by Hakushū Kitahara (AI-generated translation)

Mother, mother, where have you gone?
Let's play together with the red goldfish.
Mother won't come back—how lonely I am.
I stab one goldfish to death.

Still, she won't return—how vexed I feel.
I strangle two goldfish to death.
Why, why won't she come?—How hungry I am.
I twist and kill three goldfish.

Tears are falling, the day is ending.
The red goldfish, too, are dying, dying.
Mother, I'm scared now—their eyes are shining.
Gleaming, gleaming—the goldfish eyes are shining.

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