Adolescence As a Transition from Infancy to Adulthood: Argumentative Essay

Introduction:

Adolescence is a fascinating transition from infancy to adulthood with the onset of puberty; an exciting and significant stage of human life. ‘Variations in the age of onset of puberty may have developmental and behavioural consequences’ (Kipke, 1999) indicating adolescence differs from person to person, as hormonal changes dictate certain behaviours and influences the transition with detrimental effects on the mental, emotional and physical development.

This assignment focuses on perception and discourses constructed by society regarding adolescents, depicting influences from social media and highlighting key factors of ‘poverty’ and ‘education’ and their role in ‘common mental health’. Engle, Rao and Petrovic, (2013, p.35) highlight, the analysis of critical risk factors on children worldwide stating ‘8% children are born into high income countries with the remaining 92% residing in low income countries’ resulting in poverty and lack of education compared to their rich counterparts. Children from the 92% margin start childhood facing numerous developmental disadvantages.

Adolescent:

Children are portrayed as the future, Corsaro (2015) explains how societal discourse influences and structures childhood, establishing acceptable behaviour according to the social norms. Childhood, the period between birth and eighteen, describes ‘the state and condition of a child’s life and the quality of those years’. Prior to ‘World War Two’, children were treated like adults and expected to work for a living; during 1919 Eglantyne Jebb launched ‘save the children fund’ which recognised importance of childhood paving way for safeguarding protocols developed by the United Nation Convention on the rights of children (1992) (Unicef.org, 2015). Nowadays childhood is valued and prioritised as an important phase prior to emerging adulthood. NSPCC Learning (2020) explains how each nation has a ‘framework of legislation around education, health and social welfare’ to ensure children are safeguarded from neglect, abuse and harm.

The adolescent years fall between the ages of ten and twenty-four in society today; extended by continued education, postponing marriage and parenthood (Silver, 2018). Due to social changes and people living longer, adolescence has become more fluid. In the United Kingdom the age of maturity is eighteen, however, in some cultures this may be as young as nine years old, with puberty as the onset of adulthood (Mortimer, 2015). Essentialists have a fixed perspective and believe each person, animal or thing has its own essence (cite this). An essentialist from a set cultural background would compel a child to marry as they reach puberty. Menon, et al. (2018) explains the results of research into ‘teenage pregnancies in Zambia’ was due to ‘child marriages’. Despite health complications and violating children’s rights, ‘socio-cultural and religious norms’ still prevail in the 21st century. Culture significantly influences a young person's development and choices; essential and valuable decisions for the future made during this transition are influenced by the cultural discourse. Growing pressures on adolescents

from diverse communities, where distinct gender roles and expectations determine acceptable behaviours, subject choices and job roles'. According to the ‘World Economic Forum’, gender parity will take another hundred and eight years to achieve at the current rate (Whiting, 2019).

Discourse is the language that powers debate and shapes the thoughts and beliefs of people in society; it has a significant hold on how people build up perspectives. Michel Foucault's theory on discourse states the power of language used to define a topic during an epoch, constructs that very topic. For example, in the past a child who moves around the classroom would be referred to as a nuisance and be punished. More recently medical and educational discourse has constructed the perspective the child may have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) a medical condition, thus creating a new, more socially acceptable perspective on this behaviour (Carroll, 2015).

During adolescence children start to express themselves and show resistance to family and peers. Fosco, Lippold and Feinberg (2014) state, 'families of adolescent’s face challenges in adapting to the growing needs for privacy and autonomy’. Early adolescence is a stage of growth in children and the period for rapid maturation of the brain. The cognitive development completed during this equips the adolescent for future decision making (HHS.gov, 2019). It is a critical stage for self-esteem and building positive body image (Saunders and Fraser, 2017). The media plays a huge part in the process; exposing youth with images of thin as beautiful and endangering children's eating habits. Saunders and Fraser (2017) highlight how ‘appearance-related expectations’ are conveyed through multiple streams critical to the development of positive body image and body dissatisfaction. Pressure on growing adolescents to have a socially acceptable form is extremely high. The toll of social media on adolescents as young as ten to maintain an appearance that society depicts ‘as the perfect image’ may lead to depression, low self-esteem and even suicide (BBC News, 2019). Statistics from the ‘Mental Health Charity’ states poor body image can have adverse effects on all ages, leading to ‘anxiety and self-disgust (Eaton and Warren, 2019). (-7 words)

Factors influencing adolescence:

Poverty:

The1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child was created to reduce childhood poverty; described as the denial of children’s fundamental human rights (Gordon et al, 2003). Capitalism holds an important influence in the developing economical world. Adolescents living in poverty, will face barriers and disadvantage in this ecosystem. For example, millennials are connected to the modern world through technology with impaired access for those from low income households. Wade (2017) explains how millennials grew up in a world of digital technology with the internet embedding desires to own these items. Adolescents from deprived backgrounds trying to fit into the modern world will struggle to acquire modern technology and branded merchandise.

Ridge (2009) expounds findings from research on ‘childhood poverty’ highlighting children's deprivation of daily essentials, including food, towels, inadequate sleeping and play area. The impact of poverty explained through Maslow’s theory suggests a person cannot be motivated in life before these needs are met (Abulof, 2017) hindering children’s ability to learn, exposing them to ill health and social isolation. Dashiff et al (2009) suggest ‘adolescent’s’ awareness of

parental economic hardship was associated with a sense of helplessness, and feelings of shame and inferiority'. The Labour Government research into 'Childhood Poverty' found that children in the UK are exposed to material change and exposure to peer pressure to display ownership of the latest technology and fashion clothing (Foley et al. 2001).

Arnett (2004, p.22) explains how 'Variations in socioeconomic status' can also determine the experience of adolescence. Socioeconomic status (SES) inequities have many discourses in family life; these inequalities disrupt lives around the world. Reiss et al (2019) suggest adolescents from low income and low educated households suffer disparities of opportunity. Time series research from 34 countries highlights low SES groups affect adolescent health, promoting psychological and physical symptoms. Adolescents from low socioeconomic environments are at higher risk of teen suicide (Dashiff et al. 2009).

Theorist Uri Bronfenbrenner suggests that economic inequalities can control and construct a person's character and beliefs (Price, 2017). Children from disadvantaged backgrounds exposed to the associated constructs of disadvantage absorb these perceptions of themselves based on their economic status. Supported by 'Determinism', a theory suggesting human actions occur through nature and determines a child will imitate lifestyles and behaviours which surround them (Corsaro, 2015). Determinism excludes free will and adopts inevitability. Banduras social learning theory confirms we observe, learn and exhibit behaviours from our environment (Edinyang, 2016). In that, an adolescent from lower socioeconomic status will adopt the same way of living as their family and peers such as aspiring to low paid jobs. However, Bandura's theory contradicts the essentialist view which argues that poverty is inherited, and inescapable; resistant to growth and development. This is further supported by Marxist theory of poverty which claims poverty is inevitable in a hierarchical class structure and benefits the rich; the rich keep their social status maintained by the poor below them. Marlott (2014) describes how poor migrants from an 'isolated world with no clean water, electricity, or money,' were lured into Europe and the United States post WWII introduced into a gruelling life of labour without opportunity to develop and buy land; 'land on credit' was not available to them, trapping them in low level jobs in order to survive in the economy.

Education:

As stated earlier, children in the UK were treated as adults and expected to work, enduring tremendous hardship before WW11. However, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Education reform Act (1988), Children Acts (1989) and (1998) and the 'The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child' (UNCRC) (1990), reformed laws and introduced the idea of children's rights in Britain through safeguarding and free education. (0 words)

Previously, there were vocational and grammar schools, students attended vocational or grammar based on their abilities before entering suitable work fields; vocational education led to factories whilst grammar education led to professions such as accountancy, politics and law (Gillard, 2018). Nowadays, education is free and available to all children in Britain from as young as two years old to the age of eighteen, 'it is seen as a factor to being successful in life' (BBC News, 2014). However, all children cannot access education equally. Factors affecting access to education include family background. Children from lower social class backgrounds lag from their wealthier, higher social class peers from preschool (Pickett, 2018). They have inadequate resources, space for study and parental support at home. BBC News (2014) reports

‘parents' long working hours and a lack of quiet space to do homework as negative factors’ reducing their chances in education. Homework and exam revision are affected due to extra chores at home, inadequate space and lack of resources such as the internet.

Chowdry, et al (2010) reference data measured by ‘Social Economic Position’ of children across the United Kingdom between 2003 and 2008 where inequality between rich and poor prevails; only 21% of the poorest fifth attain five General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) passes compared to the more affluent majority. The Department of Education requires all children to transition from the ‘Early Years Foundation Stage’ (EYFS) following the National Framework. Moylett and Stewart (2012) explain how the ‘EYFS’ supports the child’s cognitive development and key literacy and numeracy skills. Children with delayed development or health diagnoses may inevitably fail to complete the ‘EYFS’ framework resulting in cognitive barriers and reduced skills which limit their future opportunities.

Theorist Pierre Bourdieu’s concept ‘Cultural capital’ created in the 21st century, is known as the currency directing culture, experience and opportunities for adolescents (Reay, 2014). 'Having an education and earning a degree is an essential piece of cultural capital’. However, students from a poor background often enter part-time employment supporting their families financially but hindering their chances of gaining a recognised qualification, and often dropping out altogether due to workload pressure (Ekbeck, 2015). Lack of cultural capital results in disappointment and an unhealthy mindset. Essentialists would expect children to study traditional ‘academic’ subjects including Maths, English, Sciences and Modern Foreign Languages and disregard non-academic subjects (Acquah, Adjei and Mensah, 2017). Adolescents in essentialist systems who are not academic or interested in academia will struggle, become unhappy, and become demotivated and disengaged.

Conclusion:

The adolescent years are very challenging and difficult for both children and their guardians. Factors influencing their transition to adulthood all interrelate. Children experiencing poverty struggle to attain good social status and education leading to reduced mental health and career prospects. Children with disabilities tend to miss out on educational opportunities which prioritise employability. Children failing to gain educational status face a life of reduced opportunity and hardship.

The internet era and social media which exposes adolescents to social constructs of acceptable norms is having negative impacts on their mental health pressuring them to follow these ‘social norms’ whilst simultaneously reducing opportunities to develop the social skills to succeed in life. Adolescents with additional needs face additional challenges in their transitions and are endangered to acquiring key life skills for a smooth transition.