

## Chapter 2

# Preparing Children for the Future

### Modernity

It would seem relevant to look more closely at some of the Mead's ideas on the rearing of children as it is there that education begins. Research into childhood development was a preoccupation of the twentieth century, an immensely valuable preoccupation. During this period we came to know there were questions to be asked and to learn what those were. The 'why' was more obvious. The world had endured two major wars of brutality and massive losses which had stimulated a rapid increase in science and technology already initiated by the previous century's preoccupation with industrialising, consumerising and monetarising society. The second war had accelerated science and technology to such an extent that it resulted in the production of a weapon that had the power for the first time to wipe out all life.

To prevent both a recurrence of another war on a global scale and the annihilation of parts, if not all, of life, and at the same time to take advantage of the commercial possibilities of change, it became imperative to understand how to respond to these accelerated changes that were beginning to gather their own momentum. Entrepreneurs, scholars and thinkers from every discipline became focused on the psychology of the human being as an individual and a member of small and large groups, from family to nation, and on sociology to explain and predict human behaviour not least in the arenas of economics and politics. The creation of the Soviet Union with its Marxist ideology posed a serious challenge to the capitalist orientation of the West not just in ideology but in strivings for military supremacy. The USA in particular was paranoid about the enemy within while Russian dissidents continued to defect to the West. Prefigurative ideas of utopias and dystopias were prevalent. There was an pressing need to 'understand' how to influence people. The work of many anthropologists, philosophers, sociologists and psychologists at this time became more widely valued and respected including, Levi Strauss, Evans Pritchard, Geertz, Sartre, Derrida, Winnicott, Bowlby, Skinner, Rogers and Perls. Psychoanalysts Anna Freud and Melanie Klein and philosophers Simone de Beauvoir, Hannah Arendt and Elizabeth Anscombe were among illustrious female contributors to this era of rich enquiry. Literature also became a powerful medium of questioning, rais-

ing awareness and disseminating ideas, multiple voices and meaning making from science fiction to autobiographies, from classical novels to new age and hallucinogenic encounters. A proliferation of films, magazines and the arts were increasingly effective as vehicles of the same. The cross pollination between different sectors and discipline domains at this time ranged from chaotic and organic to focused and disciplined. What emerged was a plethora of groundbreaking, reliable discoveries and insights, and speculative and creative ideas. Some of the former would progress understanding and some of the latter would remain within the complexity of existential meaning making of individuals and groups.

Lesser known among the post-war scholarly literati was the psychoanalyst Martha Wolfenstein, mentioned in the introduction. Like Mead, a PhD graduate from Colombia, in the 1950s she joined Mead on a project on childhood in contemporary cultures, part of the stable of culture projects initiated years previously by Boaz and Benedict. She carried out field research in France as well as co-editing the book with Mead. She later single authored work on childhood and grieving and insightful commentary on the influences of childhood traumas and losses on the works of the artists Magritte and Goya. Her lack of memorable status comparable to her contemporaries was most probably due to her less prodigious output and not being a member of any of the recognised professional bodies which belonged to the American Psychoanalytic Association. However, her research and insights with Mead on childhood remain valuable observations on parenting, and by extension, offer thought to educators—teachers and society—who have a direct or indirect influence on the ‘leading out’ of the child. The development of insight and its appropriate use could make a productive contribution to the conditions that facilitate the child not only to survive but to thrive. Those educators interested in comparative European education may enjoy her observations of the strict work focused rearing of French children in the 1950s which, according to Wolfenstein (Mead & Wolfenstein 1955, p. 116), did not inhibit their ability to enjoy life in adulthood. This she contrasted with her own American culture.

In America we regard childhood as a very nearly ideal time, a time for enjoyment, an end in itself.... We do not picture children as longing for adult prerogatives from which they are excluded.... It is in adulthood that the ceaseless round of activities which are a means to further ends sets in: the job which is a stepping stone to a better job, the social entertainments which may lead to some advancements etc. In this continual planning ahead which absorbs adults, the capacity for immediate sensuous enjoyment is often lacking. With the French ... it seems to be the other way around.

Mead (Mead & Wolfenstein 1955, p. 6–7) introduced her ideas about childhood and culture in this work by defining her terms, placing culture as key to understanding and therefore the source and resource for how we act and can act.

In the study of personality in culture we start with the recognition of the biologically given, of what all human beings have in common. In every human society, human infants are born helpless and relatively underdeveloped, dependent upon adult nurture and adult transmission of the great body of culture—beliefs, practices, skills—which makes it possible for any human, and for this human group in particular, to function as human beings. Humanity as we know it is not merely a matter of our human physique, of our prehensile thumbs,

upright posture, and highly developed brains, but of our capacity to accumulate and build upon the inventions and experiences of previous generations. A child who does not participate in this great body of tradition, whether because of defect, neglect, injury, a disease, never becomes fully human....in the course of this long maturation and learning there will be a great deal in common between childhood among the unclothed, nomadic, Australian aborigines and childhood on Park Avenue, or in rural Alabama, in Paris or Bali, Devon or Provence...The double threat of fearing to behave like a child and of yearning to behave like a child runs through all adult lives, just as the fear and hope of some day becoming an adult inform the play and fantasies of children.

It is the tension between the fear and the yearning of both the adult (parent, educator, society) and child that can give rise to all kinds of uncritiqued solutions, misguided hierarchies, inhibitions and exhibitions, acted out power dynamics, repressions and oppressions, collusion and disconnect. Children are not our experimental subjects no matter how much we say that experiments are to ensure the future is better for them. According to Mead, it was all very well producing findings that give insights; the problems arose when there was a rush to apply them with no reflection on the implications and consequences if done in isolation. These cautions, if heeded, could well have prevented a range of see-saw policies on education in the UK and the USA for the last 30 years in particular, a case of educational fads that are going to resolve the problems, problems that have been conceptualised by adults who are products of their own childhood environments of lacks and fantasies.

In the 1950s with America awash with new thinking and new models, it became an experimental playground with children and mothers under the microscope. Perhaps perfect parenting, the holy grail at the time, would create perfect children and hence a perfect conflict free world in the future. As for Mead, she did not believe in an 'ideal' anything. The search for an 'ideal' was inherently not only misguided but destructive. It contributed to imbalance, 'lopsided' was the term she sometimes used. In the rush to make changes without reflection on new discoveries or theories about rearing children she had this to say,

Only gradually have we come to realize the complexity of such applications of insight to changed social procedures, the extent to which the whole culture and the whole society must be taken into account, the limitations on innovation given by the extent to which innovating adults are genuine members of their own culture, able to reinterpret and reorganize the more drastic recommendations. We have slowly come to realize also that insights which are based on trauma, failure, casualties of all sorts are at best only half the story; that we can make no complete plans without a second set of insights based on blessing, gift, success, upon a study of those happy combinations which produce something more than just mere "adjustment"; and that from patience the growing child gains not only wounds and vulnerabilities but also extra strength and blessings. (Mead in Mead & Wolfenstein 1955, p. 451)

For Mead achieving balance was what education was all about, balance within the individual, the group and society through openness to difference, to other knowledge and new ideas. However openness was of little value without reflection on the implications of action. Action that is uncritiqued and uninformed, no matter if it is enthusiastic or well intentioned, could result in misguided and harmful consequences causing yet another group to be marginalised or excluded in the present, in the future and from the future.

To offer a contemporary illustration, at the time of writing this monograph, the UK is experiencing yet another wave of changes to the educational system, months before a general election. The opinion of policy makers is polarised between, on the one hand, ‘the pupil centred’ approach ‘of the 60s’ and ‘leftie’ which opponents criticise as being soft and non directive resulting in the UK falling behind Europe and the emerging economies on achievement scale and, on the other hand, the ‘conservative’ ‘right wing’ approach geared towards education as schooling for employability and leadership in the future. Education as vehicles for political party electioneering would have been a travesty to Mead and polarisation an act counter to common sense and ‘balance’. In such an atmosphere of rapid and uncritiqued change, both the young adults and their teachers become diverted by the implementation of new strategies and progress becomes target and hence anxiety-driven. This is not unlike parents who constantly change their approach to rearing children based on the latest ideas which fuel anxieties that they may be ‘doing things wrong’. This undermines their experience and thus their learning from their experience. The generators of the ideas and those who enforce them directly or indirectly do not take responsibility for the impact they will have on a generation of parents and children. Her paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Museum of Natural History (1953, p. 477) is uncompromising in its criticism of how new developments in the rearing of children and the mother–child relationship were being disassembled by others and fractions of research or thinking used as if they were wholes generating modern mythologies and anxieties on the correct rearing of children to ensure more stable personalities. Mead’s own views, based on her extensive cultural observations, anticipated the publicly advocated modern family constellations in western society today, constellations which were in existence in many of the ‘primitive’ societies which anthropologists had encountered. She challenged the notion of the exclusivity of the mother–child tie that was being heavily promoted at the time. Mead had a passion and determination to challenge the status quo of uncritiqued practices that prevented cultures from evolving.

...the specific biological situation of the continuing relationship of the child to its biological mother and its need for care by human beings are being hopelessly confused in the growing insistence that child and biological mother, or mother surrogate, must never be separated, that all separation even for a few days is inevitable damaging, and that if long enough it does irreversible damage. This ... is a new and subtle form of antifeminism in which men—under the guise of exalting the importance of maternity—are tying women more tightly to their children... Actually, anthropological evidence gives no support at present to the value of such an accentuation of the tie between mother and child. On the contrary, cross cultural studies suggest that adjustment is most facilitated if the child is cared for by warm, friendly people. Clinical studies and anthropological studies support the relationship between strong attachments to single individuals in childhood and capacity for a limited number of intense, exclusive relationships in adulthood....

Mead involved herself in all manner of movements, gatherings and initiatives which could give insight into human behaviour and the obvious focus was on childhood. The influence of the childhood years on adult behaviour could impact on whether a culture remained stagnant and island-bound or evolved to become increasingly inclusive. Her works *Male and Female* (1968), first published in 1949, and *Sex*

and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies (1950), first published in 1935, capture both the explicit and nuanced relational dynamics of gender and society which affects the rearing of children and the continuation of cultural mores and memes which may have inhibiting effects on the achieving of a more equitable future. These works continue to have significance for societies today. In western society, advances have been made in gender equality in terms of legislation, however, in terms of practices and attitudes much remains to be attended to and occasional visits to these works by Mead provide an intense lens on those nuances that seem to have evaded change (Chap. 4).

The ‘big players’ in child rearing practices and the impact on the development of personality were thriving in Europe and the USA including Erikson, Anna Freud, Jung, Rogers, Winnicott and Bowlby. Bowlby, like Mead, believed that observations and conceptual frameworks arising from intense clinical and field research could be translated and applied to society in general. Mead was influenced by Bowlby’s attachment theory (Bowlby 2005) which postulates that as the child grows its responses to itself, others and events are influenced by the quality of attachment experienced with the primary caregiver. For Bowlby this is primarily the mother. It is also a spatial notion. Bowlby used his knowledge and practitioner experience with children and childrearing to conceptualise a social parallel of how his attachment theory might work in the context of wider society in the relationship between social leader and citizen and by extension the teacher and the pupil.

It is not useful in this context to set up a critique of who influenced whom in this period in the western world charged with research and ideas on the roots of human personality, conditioning and behaviour. This era was marked by a need to avert wars and annihilation of peoples through exploring the human in society from every conceivable angle which motivated scholars and researchers from a range of disciplines to enter the same pool and seek treasures (Campbell 1990) which, in many cases, turned out to be similar such as the notion of democracy which is looked at in more detail in Chap. 5. Bowlby according to Holmes (1993, p. 201)

... contrasts three styles of social arrangements: [which were parental types]—democratic, authoritarian and *laissez-faire*. Only the democratic—one in which leaders and teachers listen and are responsive to people—is effective.

Mead was also a contemporary of possibly the most famous ‘father’ of modern childhood rearing practices in the USA, and subsequently Europe, Dr Benjamin Spock. They shared a strong interest in the work of Freud and the relationship between psychoanalytic theory and the dynamic interplay between culture and personality. Such work was informed by substantial clinical research during which analysts were like anthropologists of the mind. This substantial knowledge on why human beings behave the way they do as individuals and in groups may have been superseded in some cases by advances in technologies which now enable the carrying out of ethnographic research inside the living foetus and in the living brain at molecular level, but mostly so far it has been complementing or providing evidentiary support for what arose over many years in clinical practice and close observations. Neuroscience has also been increasingly challenging theories of what is ‘normal’ behaviour. Anthropologists had been critiquing this particularly during the

second half of the twentieth century by different means: ethnography and ethnology of cultures of difference.

However for Mead, as a cultural anthropologist, how human beings grow is a matter of the dynamic of interaction between what the agent is exposed to over formative and long periods of time and how the agent subsequently responds to their changing environment. It is this that threatens to rupture the continuity. This was why education from the cradle to the grave needed to be constantly explored presenting opportunities for insights to be developed, reflected on and applied to unlock a future free from human induced and human sustained wars and environmental disasters.

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