**“Value-added fun”: Construction of childhood at the Israeli Children’s Museum in Holon**

**Abstract**

The research presented in this study is an ethnography of the Israeli Children's Museum in Holon. The study is based on the research tradition of the new paradigm of childhood studies that views childhood as the result of social constructionism – that is, the composite of perspectives, understandings, arrangements and institutions that serve to organize children’s lives and the thinking about them. In continuation of this tradition, the study discusses the construction of childhood at the museum, as a case study of a designated setting for children where organized events are held for them. The ethnographic aspect focused on analyzing the ways in which childhood (and adulthood) is constructed through the museum exhibitions, the educational activities during the tours, and the interactions between the adults and children there, and the museum staff and visitors.

The field work was carried out between 2010-2013 and included observing tours of the various museum exhibitions, and the processes of organizing activities and training the museum guides. Likewise, it includes interviews with key figures at the museum, and ongoing dialog with informers on the scene. The study also included semiotic analysis of the visual content, aural content, and narrative components of the museum exhibits, as well as an analysis of the organizational texts that discuss the activity patterns and the pedagogical approaches on which they are based.

The study findings show that this is a social arena characterized by careful management of the children’s activity – their bodies, patterns of movement in the arena, and their emotions and awareness. Such management forms part of the adults’ interaction with the children, and takes place through practices of speech that lie at the heart of the organizational activity and are anchored in pedagogic discourse regarding the good of the children, and the adults’ responsibility for its implementation. This discourse is based on viewing childhood as the development of the children’s bodies and souls, that while natural and universal, also requires adult intervention, management, and monitoring so as to ensure its realization. This construction of childhood in the arena is connected to the definition of the affinity between childhood and adulthood and the differences between them. These are discussed through the ability to regulate behavior and control expression.

The ethnographic aspect focuses on the discourse regarding ‘proper’ childhood that is the foundation of the pedagogical and administrative practices used for managing the museum setting, the experience of visiting it, and the interactions taking place there. This discourse is connected with the construction of both childhood and adulthood, since alongside its innate significance for the construction of children’s identities, it also contains meanings that touch on the adults’ identities, and to what extent the activity and speech patterns that characterize them express their commitment to do good for the children. As will be shown, this discourse is anchored in the culture and lifestyles of the middle class and its characteristic child-raising patterns, and its centrality at the museum is linked to the city of Holon’s renewal process over the past two decades, and how that process has been utilized for cultural initiatives aimed at attracting middle class populations to the city.

The presentation of the findings is based on descriptions of the various exhibits, the tours around them, and the story behind them. These serve for discussing the meanings that arise from them regarding the construction of childhood at the museum. The summary of the findings will include a discussion of 4 keywords that are used at the scene for thinking and communication about the children’s good, and action regarding the children. These keywords are: development, running activities, excitement, and understanding. The discussion will lead to studying the meanings that arise from the findings regarding the theoretical, pedagogical, and empirical issue of the dimensions of agency allowed for children in spaces designated for them, where organized activities are held for them, and the character of this agency.