**“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 which views childhood as social construction – that is, the composite of perspectives, understandings, regulations and institutions that serve to organize children’s lives and the thinking about them. Following this tradition, the study discusses the construction of childhood at the museum, as a case study of a designated setting, where organized activities are held for children. The ethnographic perspective of the study focuses 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 adults and children, as well as museum staff and visitors.

The field work was conducted between 2010-2013 and included observing tours of the various museum exhibitions as well as the processes of organizing activities and the training of museum guides. Likewise, it includes interviews with key figures at the museum, and ongoing dialog with informants on the scene. The study also includes semiotic analysis of the visual content, aural content, and narrative components of the museum exhibits and activities, as well as an analysis of the organization’s texts which discuss the museum’s practices and the pedagogical approaches on which it is based.

Data collected from fieldwork portrays the museum as a social arena that is characterized by careful management of children’s actions: their bodies, their movement within the museum, and their emotions and thoughts. Such management is accomplished through the adults’ interaction with the children, and takes place through speech acts that lie at the heart of the organizational activity and are anchored in pedagogic discourse regarding children’s best interests, and the adults’ responsibility for allowing this. This discourse is based on viewing childhood as a process of development, both physical and mental,, which while natural and universal, also requires adult intervention, management, and monitoring to ensure its realization. This construction of childhood defines the link between childhood and adulthood and defines the differences between them. These are discussed through the ability to regulate behavior and control expression.

The ethnographic perspective focuses on the discourse regarding ‘proper’ childhood meaning the foundation of the pedagogical and administrative practices used for managing the museum setting, the experience of visiting it, and the interactions taking place therein. This discourse is connected with the construction of both childhood and adulthood, which alongside its innate significance for the construction of children’s identities, also contains meanings that touch on the adults’ identities, and to the extent that their characteristic activity and speech patterns reflect 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. The centrality of this discourse at the museum is linked to Holon’s process of renewal over the past two decades, and the manner in which that process has been utilized for cultural entrepreneurship aimed at attracting middle class populations to the city.

The presentation of these findings is based on descriptions of the various exhibits, the tours taking place in them, and the stories used to conduct them. These are used to discuss the meanings that arise from them regarding the construction of childhood at the museum. The summary of the findings will include a discussion of four keywords that are used in the museum to think and communicate about the children’s best interests, and to act to towards them. These keywords are: development, operation, excitement, and understanding. Discussing these words will lead to studying the meanings that arise from the findings regarding the theoretical, pedagogical, and empirical issues related to the elements of agency which characterize children in the spaces designated for them, where organized activities take place.