

CHILD PROTECTION: SOCIO-THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS AND MINISTRY IMPLICATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

I am a minister who helps in my local church. One night, one of our lay pastors called me and reported to me that one of the girls in our Bible Study outreach had been sexually abused by her grandfather. I was at a loss on what to advise her. We have a Child Protection Policy in our local church, but this case happened outside our church. What should I tell our lay pastor? Since this child is not a regular member of our local church nor is she registered in our childcare sponsorship program, we cannot implement the procedures that we have laid out in our Child Protection Policy against this alleged abusive grandfather. So, after considering the problem, I told our lay pastor to do the following: first, make sure the child was safe. Take her out of the abusive situation. Second, report the incident to the Barangay Child Welfare Desk. She did all these things and was rather successful in preventing the abuse from happening again. Now the child is attending our regular childcare sponsorship ministry. How many churches today are equipped to respond to disclosures of abuse?

This article aims to discuss socio-theological perspectives on child protection and identify practical ministry applications.

WHY CHILD PROTECTION?

Davao City. An Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) came home to bury her two-year-old son who was beaten to death by his guardians.¹ What was the reason for the beating? The guardians got angry after the child urinated in his pants.

Manila. Another boy was beaten to death by other wards in a Manila shelter for street children. Observers described this government-run rehabilitation center as a concentration camp because of its cases of negligence and maltreatment.²

Cebu City. Six children—most under age 7—were sexually exploited in images and video broadcast online to customers in over 19 countries on four continents! This was reported by the International Justice Mission (IJM).³ Two girls who were not quite eight years old were made to do sexual acts with minors as well as adults. These included intercourse as well as acts involving sex toys. This happened in Metro Manila as reported by ABS-CBN news.⁴

Worldwide, there are nearly 2 million children in the commercial sex trade.⁵ Manila is one of the most lucrative destinations for traffickers. The Philippines, in general, is a major hub of a billion-dollar global child cybersex industry.⁶ Women and children from the provinces are lured to the capital with the promise of a better life. But these women and children mostly end up in the sex trafficking industry, both in the entertainment clubs as well as in cybersex, the modern-day form of slavery. Now we ask the question: what happened to the Philippines—the largest Christian country in Asia, with over 89% of the population identifying as Christians? Why are our children deprived of a happy childhood and are suffering, sometimes in silence?

Child protection is part and parcel of caring for children in a holistic way. Child protection is a broad term to describe philosophies, policies, standards, guidelines and procedures to protect children from both intentional and unintentional harm.⁷ Brewster

and McCloud call it, “protecting children from ourselves.”⁸ To know the essence of child protection we need to identify who the child is and the vital reasons why the child should be protected, using research as well as existing statutory policies both within the Philippines as well as in the international context.

WHO IS THE CHILD?

When a child comes into this world, a plan has already been set in motion in the heart of God. A child does not come into this world by accident, though some parents may think that one or two of their children came out unplanned. In the church, when a child passes through our doors, we have to be aware that a thousand possibilities are before us! How astounding to be part of the journey of this person, fearfully and wonderfully crafted by the Creator Himself! To be able to protect this child, one needs to know the nature of this person.

Let us look at the child using three lenses, to wit, biological, cultural, and biblical, and let us identify some implications for child protection in the local church (Figure 1). This diagram presents the ways in which the nature of the child can be viewed. All these lenses contribute to how we view and consequently treat a child.

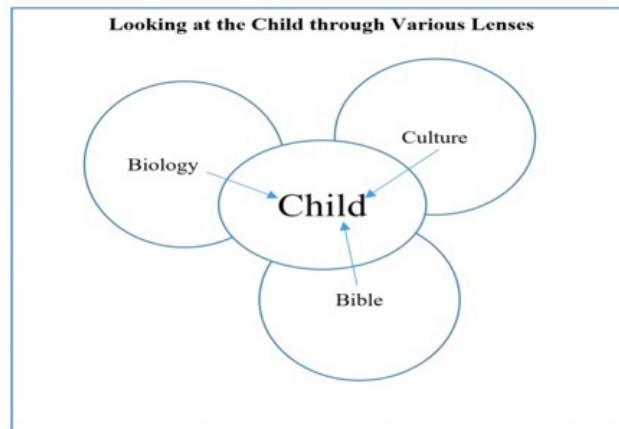


Figure 1: Looking at the Child Using Various Points of View

BIOLOGICAL VIEW ON THE CHILD

First, let us look at the child using the lens of biology. Davies writes, “A human child is the product of human conception, usually via sexual intercourse between an adult male and an adult female which results in the fertilization of the female ovum by the male sperm.”⁹ When a child is born, she is 100% human, capable of knowing, being, and doing. Post-modern researchers and child psychologists note that contrary to the belief of the Greek Stoics, Aristotle, Rousseau, and Locke a millennia or so ago—a newborn child is not born with a blank slate, or *tabula rasa*, but rather is a human being complete with her genetic code, preferences, and leanings. There are studies showing how newborns display knowledge of some form which they did not have to learn from the outside world. For instance, a study conducted by Van Heugtena and Johnson on infants showed that “infants begin to exhibit some ability to recognize variable word forms from speech very early on.”¹⁰ The “Baby Human” experiments found out that “the baby human comes into the world ready to communicate” and that the moment a baby is born, they are “attuned” to language.¹¹ Janet Werker, awarded for her research investigating infants’ language acquisition concludes, “The more time you spend around infants and young children, the more you realize how organized the mind is from early in life.”¹² This new development in research shows us that even before a baby is born into this world, God has already made her ready and so our responsibility starts right there and then especially in relation to child protection. Children develop from general motor, social, mental, and emotional characteristics to increasingly complex characteristics.¹³ Our goal is for every child to thrive, to mature, to develop her God-given potential. A child’s growth can be affected by many factors like nutrition, rest, exercise, illness, abuse, neglect, nurture, and a host of other elements. This is why in Christian education our ministries are designed from “the womb to the tomb.” We aim to minister to the whole person.

CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE CHILD

Second, children may also be looked at through the eyes of culture. In the international community, one human rights treaty ratified by 196 countries is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This international document defines ‘child’ as “every human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.”¹⁴ Culturally, the child is a member of a people group. In the Philippines, the child is considered to be “one of the most important assets of the nation.”¹⁵ Under this definition comes the following declaration of the Policy of the Child and Welfare Code: The child is not a mere creature of the State. This welfare code in the country is replete with injunctions on how to raise, protect, and nurture the child with the help of the State and other organizations in the country like the church or NGOs. Filipino anthropologist Landa Jocano commented that the majority of the Filipino people view children as “*biyaya ng Diyos*” (gifts from God).¹⁶ This view reflects the biblical view of the child. Furthermore, Tomas Andres explains that children are signs of God’s favor, the fulfillment of manhood and womanhood, and are gifts from above.¹⁷ Filipinos in general place a high value on children.

BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHILD

Finally, the Bible, the textbook for our education in the local church, describes the child using the following unique descriptions among many others: (1) created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-31; 2:18-25; Ps. 139:13-14); (2) heritage from the Lord (Ps. 127:3); (3) included in God’s covenant (Deut. 29:10-15, 31:12-13); and (4) crown to the aged (Prov. 17:6). These Scripture references show how special a child is in the eyes of God and the biblical writers. Furthermore, children have the following capacities as noted in Scriptures: (1) to glorify God (Matt. 21:15,16); (2) to come to Christ (Mark 10:13-16); (3) to understand Scripture (2 Tim. 3:15); (4) to receive the promises

(Acts 2:39); (5) to believe (Matt.18:6); (6) to receive training (Eph. 6:4); and (7) to worship in God's house (1 Sam. 1:24,28).¹⁸ As such, the local church has the joy, responsibility, and opportunity to nurture them in the knowledge of God until they "reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13, NIV).

Zuck writes: "Children are not an afterthought in the Bible. The word "child" is used 121 times; children—448 times; son or sons—2,700 times; (not counting the references to Jesus as the Son of God); firstborn— 100 plus times; boys and girls—196 times. There are also dozens of stories about or including children. All together the child and family-related words occur more than 8,000 times."¹⁹ This shows how the Bible portrays the importance of children.

Cadwallader, a reflective Catholic scholar observes, "Frequently in the Bible and in Christian tradition, children appear as little more than objects of adult writing and that not always favourably. Speech by and to children in the NT is miniscule, possibly ten instances in each case. By contrast children are spoken about (whether in direct speech, narrative or epistolary address) numerous times, at least 82 times, 45 in direct or indirect speech."²⁰ Cadwallader is emphasizing that the church needs to put children on equal footing with adults and that unless children are "factored inextricably into Christological and theological exposition, actual children will remain marginalised and forced to be dependent on fashions of adult concern and attention."²¹

To enrich this discussion, the Lausanne Occasional Paper (LOP) created by the Lausanne Issue Network for Children at Risk presents a high view of children and a high view of Scripture using the biblical story of young Samuel.²² Using this approach, the following are some biblical principles that emerge: (1) all children should be holistically nurtured throughout childhood; (2) God uses whom God will, including those on the margins of life, where many children find themselves; (3) children can be called by God and hear God's voice; (4) children can be active participants in worship and service to God; (5) the people of God are to respect, listen to, envision, and empower children as vulnerable agents of God's mission. These

principles provide a framework which allow the church to nurture and protect children as well as empower and release them as agents of God's mission. This framework also provides boundaries so that children are not placed in situations of spiritual abuse by the adults who try to release them to be part of the *missio Dei*. This gives us the unifying theme that children are important because they are created in the image of God and that they need our care and attention.

CHILD PROTECTION IN THE BIBLE

God in His sovereignty has entrusted the care of children to adults. When God created the world, we read in Genesis chapter 2:7, "Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature" (ESV). Then Genesis 2:15 says, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it" (ESV). Then when we go back to Genesis 1:27-28, the Bible says, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth'" (ESV). Finally, we find in Genesis chapter 4:1 that Adam and Eve had children. The fruit of the relationship of Adam and Eve is children. This implies that God intends for children to be cared for by persons who are in a relationship with one another in the context of a loving family.

CHILD PROTECTION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Looking at Deuteronomy 6, there is a mandate for the family and the whole congregation of Israel to teach the laws of God in a total curriculum of experience. The teaching of the law is emphasized so Israel can flourish in the Promised Land into which they are about

to enter. Within the context of God's law, there is protection. The foreigner, the orphans, and the fatherless are protected under the law of God. Thus, when Israel observes God's statutes, no one is to be treated badly, especially the children. The community of faith has the mandate to provide this environment of loving and caring. In like manner, New Testament believers are mandated to go and teach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which also encapsulates loving God and one's neighbor (Matthew 18 and Matthew 22), just like what Moses taught Israel as written in the book of Deuteronomy.

CHILD PROTECTION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Jesus shows His care for children by providing a space for them to come to Him (Matt. 19:14). When little children were brought to Him, Jesus placed His hands on them (Matt. 19:13). John Wesley commented that the laying on of hands was a rite which was very early used in praying for a blessing on young persons.²³ Jesus also mentions the horrible punishment of someone who causes little ones to sin. He says, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matthew 18:6, NKJV). This punishment was practised by the Greeks, Syrians, and Romans at the time. A millstone is a large circular rock used to grind wheat and other kinds of grain into flour. This is then turned around by either a human being or an ox. If a person is thrown down into the sea with this kind of millstone, that person, even though he or she knows how to swim would still die by drowning due to the fact that the weight of the stone would not allow him or her to swim to the surface. Jesus cautions His audience on the importance of making sure that the little ones are brought up in a gentle and healthy environment.

In this particular verse, namely, Matthew 18:6, "little ones" in Greek is "mikros mikroteros," meaning "small in size." Keener writes, "The most powerless members of ancient society were little children.

In Jewish culture, children were loved, not despised; but the point is that they had no status apart from that love, and no power or privileges apart from what they received as total dependents on their parents.”²⁴

In the Hellenistic context, Gundry-Volf explains,

*Childhood was viewed largely negatively as a state of immaturity to outgrow . . . people considered children fundamentally deficient and not yet human in the full sense. They were physically small, underdeveloped, and vulnerable. They were mentally deficient and ignorant; they spoke nonsense and failed to think and plan rationally; they were capricious, foolish and quarrelsome. In a word, they lacked the prime Roman virtue of reason and could not participate in the rational world of Roman citizens.*²⁵

But Jesus modeled a different kind of attention to the “little ones.” Jesus placed a great value on the children. Children as created in the image of God possess intellect, reason, spirituality, feelings, beauty, immortality, and creativity. As created in the image of God, children are also capable of righteousness. As such they have to be respected and treated as persons, not as property or objects that anyone can dispose of. Children have to be respected for who they are, not for who or what adults want them to be.

The church needs to make parents fully aware that there is a need to respect the dreams, goals and life choices of their children. The church needs to emphasize to the parents not to live vicariously through their children’s lives but instead to provide opportunities for children to choose what they want to become and support, guide, and journey with them until they become what God intends them to be. This does not mean that parents go to the extreme and just allow their children to do whatever they want apart from godly values. There needs to be guidance, gentle prodding, and some discipline in the journey.

In the home and in the ministries of the church, children’s voices need to be amplified. They have to be consulted in decisions that

affect their wellbeing and happiness. The church can respect the rights and voices of children in the following ways: (1) by studying the nature, characteristics, rights and responsibilities of children; (2) by amplifying their voices through creative activities that allow children to express their preferences, like drawing, casual conversations, journaling, or by providing, for example, a “free wall,” where children write their wishes, prayer requests, or other thoughts; and (3) by letting them participate on matters that affect them, e.g., asking them what lessons and activities they would prefer to be included in their curriculum for Sunday school or other children’s programs, what kinds of outdoor activities are meaningful to them, how the church should be structured to fit their physical, socio emotional, and spiritual needs, and what kinds of opportunities they desire for service, missions and outreach .

WHO SHOULD PROTECT THE CHILD?

Child protection is a cooperative effort among many individuals and systems. Kevin Bales, professor of Contemporary Slavery at the Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation writes that slavery can be eliminated in our lifetime. He asserts, “Slavery has been and *is* coming to an end.”²⁶ He discusses the historical perspective of slavery and emancipation—how individuals and governments have been successful in eradicating slavery with collaboration and strong political will.

There is a model that could be used in our efforts towards collaboration to ensure the safety of children in our midst. There are many possible models, but this theory is unique since it has included religious organizations in the development of the child. This is called Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory. Bronfenbrenner has a unique definition of development. He writes, “Development is a lasting change in the way in which a person perceives and deals with his environment.”²⁷ This implies that if one desires to study a child, he needs to consider not just the child’s immediate environment,

but also the influences of the larger system that directly or indirectly affect the development of the child. These systems have continuing impacts on an individual's development.²⁸ For Bronfenbrenner, the ecological environment is conceived topologically as a nested arrangement of concentric structures, each contained within the next. These structures are referred to as micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems and can be defined as follows:²⁹

A microsystem is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics.

A mesosystem comprises the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates such as, for a child, the relations among home, school, and neighborhood peer group. For an adult, this includes family, work, and social life.

An exosystem refers to one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person.

The macrosystem refers to consistencies in the form and content of lower-order systems (micro-, meso-, and exo-) that exist, or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies.

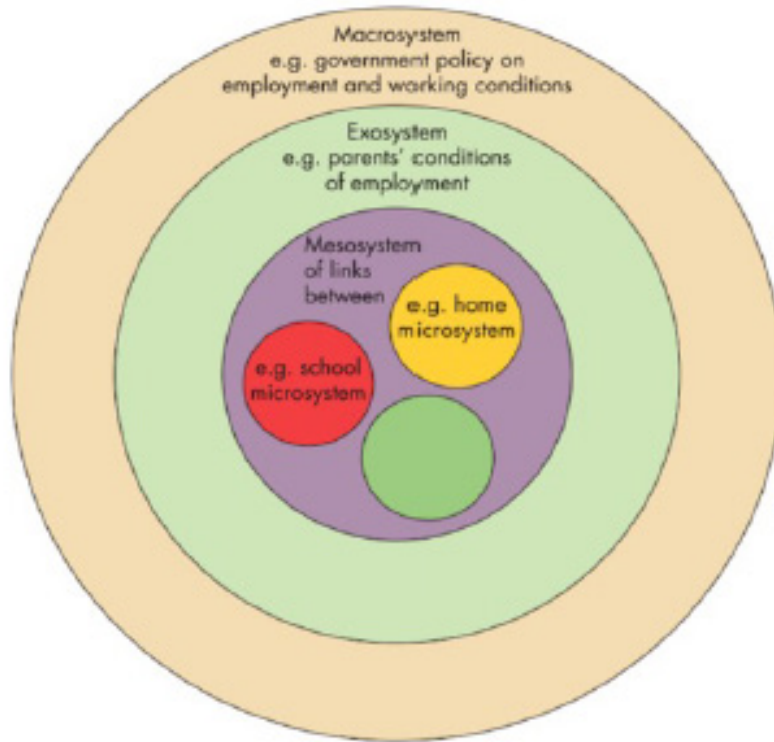


Figure 2: Bronfenbrenner's (1989) Ecological Framework³⁰

The illustration above captures how the various systems in a child's life contribute directly and/or indirectly to her holistic development. In Figure 2, the church is part of the microsystem together with the family, peers, and school—the world the child revolves in most of her life. If the church fails, the world of the child could capsize. Without the presence of religious training, the child would have little or no input on things that could nurture her fully in terms of spirituality. Michael Vail, the series editor for the Clergy Development of the Church of the Nazarene made use of Bronfenbrenner's framework. In one of the lessons, he writes in relation to the settings that affect the self-image of the child: "The factors in the innermost ring are the most directly influential in the child's life. They also are the factors that tend to cause the most long-lasting effects in a child's life because they influence children's perceptions of how the world operates." This

is just one example of how Bronfenbrenner's theory is accepted even by church educators.³¹

IMPLICATIONS OF THE ECOLOGICAL THEORY TO CHILD PROTECTION IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

1. Everyone in the church has the opportunity to be part of protecting children from abuse coming from different levels of society or the environment.
2. When the immediate setting of a child's defense is broken, i.e., the home, the church should be there to make up for the deficiencies. This would imply caring and nurturing programs and activities that would minister to the need for love that the child does not feel at home. Of course, nothing can replace the love that a family can give. However, the church can teach the parents how to provide love and affection within the home.
3. This also implies that the whole network of influences--the home, the school, and societal attitudes--should value child protection at all levels.

SUMMARY

This chapter has discussed the nature of the child as viewed through the lenses of biology, culture, and the Bible. Children are complex beings needing adult care, protection, and nurture so they can flourish and thrive. Children need all the help they can get from all sectors of society for holistic growth.

¹ Bonna Pamplona, "OFW Comes Home to Bury Son Beaten Dead by Guardians," ABS-CBN News (November 20, 2016).

- 2 Nathaniel R. Melican, "Boy Beaten to Death by Other Wards in Manila Shelter for Street Children," ABS-CBN News, (March 12, 2015).
- 3 "Filipino Children as Young as 2 Rescued from Cybersex Trafficking," August 20, 2015.
- 4 Agence France-Presse, "2 Young Girls Rescued from Cyber-Sex Operators" (March 12, 2015).
- 5 International Justice Mission Fact Sheet."
- 6 Agence France-Presse, "2 Young Girls Rescued from Cyber-Sex Operators."
- 7 Elanor Jackson and Marie Wernham, *Child Protection Policies and Procedures Toolkit* (London: Consortium for Street Children, 2005), 9.
- 8 Dan Brewster and Heather McCloud, "Child Protection: Protecting Children from Ourselves," Presentation for Council of International Child Ministries, Holland (March 2001), n.p.
- 9 Maire Messenger Davies, *Children, Media and Culture* (Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Professional Publishing 2010), 9.
- 10 Marieke van Heugtena and Elizabeth K. Johnson, "Infants Exposed to Fluent Natural Speech," *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research* 55 (April 2012): 554.
- 11 "To Talk," Baby Human videos, Janet Werker's Lab, University of British Columbia, Canada. In one of their experiments with a 12-hour-old baby, they found two amazing facts: (1) baby humans begin to learn the properties of language in the womb; and (2) at birth they prefer the rhythms of their native language to those of an unfamiliar one.
- 12 Dr. Janet Werker Honoured for Research Into Children's Language Acquisition," The University of British Columbia. Other child psychologists and theorists like Piaget, Erikson, and Vygotsky relate that even at an early age, infants already have the capacity to observe and assimilate the world around them. Vygotsky so believed in the power of the newborn that he wrote, "Learning and development are interrelated from the child's very first day of life" (Vygotsky, *Mind in Society* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978], 84); cited in Dialing, "The Impact of VNBC Elementary School Upon the Holistic Development of Its Selected Grade Six Students" (Thesis, APNTS, 2013), 31.
- 13 Verna Hildebrand, *Guiding Young Children*, chapter 16.
- 14 Convention on the Rights of the Child, 57.
- 15 "The Child and Youth Welfare Code."
- 16 F. Landa Jocano, *Slum as a Way of Life: A Study of Coping Behavior in an Urban Environment* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1975), 56.
- 17 Tomas Andres, *Negotiating of Filipino Values* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1992), 46.
- 18 Biblical Cyclopedia Index," *The Open Bible*, expanded ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983).
- 19 Roy B. Zuck, *Precious in His Sight* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 1.
- 20 The figures are variable because of the 'age' and metaphorical expansiveness of 'child/children.' This is further discussed in Cadwallader, "Towards a Theology of the Child," (2013), 15.
- 21 Cadwallader, "Towards a Theology of the Child," 15.
- 22 Desiree Segura-April and others, "Mission with Children at Risk," *Lausanne Occasional Paper* (LOP) 66 (2014): 4.
- 23 *John Wesley's Explanatory Notes*, "Matthew 19."
- 24 Craig S. Keener, *New Testament, The IVP Bible Background Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: 1993), 93.

- 25 Judith Gundry-Volf, *The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 31-32.
- 26 Kevin Bales, "Is It NaÔve to Think Slavery and Exploitation Will Ever Come to an End?" in *Stopping the Traffick* (Oxford: Regnum Book International, 2014), 14.
- 27 Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 3.
- 28 Bronfenbrenner, "Environments in Developmental Perspective" (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 1999), 3.
- 29 Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development*, 3, 25-26.
- 30 Peter K. Smith, Helen Cowie, and Mark Blades, *Understanding Children's Development*, 6th ed. (West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons Ltd., 2015), 11.
- 31 Michael W. Vail, series curriculum ed. *Developing Children's Ministry* (Kansas City, MO: Clergy Development Church of the Nazarene, 2008), 4; cited in Tago, "Perceptions of Selected Parents on Parental Involvement in Light Of Epstein's Framework" (Thesis, APNTS, 2017), 67.

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