

Tracing the Global Child: Global Politics Shaping Local Childhoods

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Abstract

The concept of childhood, and particularly considering the social and cultural construction of childhood, has not received enough focus in the ongoing debates on globalization and its consequences. Yet, essential elements of globalization are omnipresent in the guise of new discourses around childhood, which have become particularly resonant transnationally. A lot of international treaties or conventions, such as the United Nations Children's Rights Convention (1989) shape national and local realities of children worldwide based on global conceptualisations of childhood, which are based mainly on western ideals of what it means to be a child. Applying such global notions of childhood in different contexts around the world often does not consider local realities and cultural ideologies of childhood, and indirectly does more harm than good. Childhood constitutes an essential and very delicate nexus in the continuously changing realities. Since childhood occupies a symbolic space where the consequences of globalization can be reflected, it cannot be left unconsidered. Not only childhood comprehends the basis of cultural connection, but it is the main mechanism of social recreation. Building on postcolonial and critical whiteness studies, the paper tries to analyse a few aspects relating the westernization and construction of the global child ideal and presenting an overview of the impacts of children global policies towards shaping local childhoods.

Keywords: Tracing the Global Child, Global Politics, Shaping Local Childhoods.

Introduction

The emerging ideas about children's rights and recent theories regarding childhood continue to contour and frame our ideas about childhood and also the everyday reality of many children in different parts of the globe. Globalisation is changing the very notion of childhood and is introducing new constructions of childhood that dictate what childhood or a child should be like. The interplays between global vs. local dynamics nowadays affect the development and the everyday life of children in different parts of the globe. These dynamics often agitate existing practices, cultures,

identities and socio-economic realities which translate in significant changes. With the emergence of global conventions and international treaties regarding children's rights and protection such as The Child's Rights Convention (1989) national and local realities of children worldwide are shaped regarding global conceptualisations of childhood, which are based mainly on western ideals and mostly Anglo-American social constructions of what it means to be a child. "The Convention on the Rights of the Child is premised upon the notion that concepts such as human rights or children's rights are not negotiable at the local level and that differences between cultures and between individuals within cultures can be ignored" (Montgomery, 2001 :82). Besides focusing on the growing influence of globalism, on the other hand, there needs to be a better consideration of how such global changes impact different childhood local realities in different parts of the globe.

The Global Child Construct

Childhood in the 20th century is seen as a separate category from adulthood, and being regarded as such, childhood is constructed based on the opposite characteristics of adulthood. A child is represented as not belonging to the adult world, and childhood is regarded as a 'safe space' which needs to be fostered and nurtured from adults.

The notion of 'childhood' is both historically and culturally conditioned and "how the conception of childhood has changed historically and how conceptions differ across cultures is a matter of scholarly controversy and philosophical interest" (see Kennedy 2006, in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Belonging to the category of "childhood" it often means being portrayed as innocent, vulnerable, and in need to be protected from adults. Nevertheless, this remains a westernized and generalized notion of what childhood means, since there are many definitions. According to one definition, a child is "a person below the age of eighteen years of age" (The Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989: Article 1).

Arguing on another general definition : "A child is a human being in the early stages of its life-course, biologically, psychologically and socially; it is a member of a generation referred to collectively by adults as children, who together temporarily occupy the social space that is created for them by adults and referred to as childhood" (James & James, 2008: 14). Even though there are many definitions, it should not be forgotten that childhood as a definition differs across time and space and it should not be regarded as an invariable entity. Ariès (1962) argues how the idea of childhood is relatively new and that modern western societies. Ariès's theory also stresses that the way how children are perceived, being treated or socially institutionalized by adults, how childhood is socially constructed has significant impacts on children's experiences and their engagement in the social spheres. With the rise of the Children's Rights movement, the social construction of childhood is very central to discourses related to children's development and children's rights fulfilment and these discourses have spread globally, nurturing ideals, practices and

changing realities worldwide. The fundamentals of many children's rights initiatives are based on a universal – global child ideal.

Understanding and deconstructing the Global Child ideal means at first considering the term “global”. This term has been conceptualised as meaning “universal” – development occurs in the same way for every child in every context but it has been understood also as global in the sense of spreading dominant ideologies, mainly coming from the West, to other parts of the globe (Fleer et al., 2012:1-2). These definitions are reflected in laws and policies and also implemented in the social practices that affect children.

Educational institutions such as schools for example, play an important role when speaking about the construction of an ongoing culture of childhood. Nsamenang (2008:23-24) talks about educational colonization, where the norms of the Anglo-American cultures are taught in schools all over the world. Progress is measured according to global standards of achievement such as PISA assessments, which make development and school achievements standardized all over the world. In addition, the author explains how education all over the world needs to take under consideration the importance of the cultural component regarding child development and cultural notions of childhood in general when considering discourses or policy regarding child development. Nsamenang (2008:24) cites Smale that stresses that “the needs to recognize the importance of cultural conceptualisations of childhood, and of the child development theories and practices that follow on from these in a given culture”. Prout (2005) notes that the human nature is moulded in a certain way that it possesses hybrid characteristics of biology and culture, and it cannot simply be reduced to one or the other.

Considering rights and children's well-being in the big picture means considering the social identities and development as an inseparable process from the context where children grow. By valuing different components that do not belong to a certain culture and imposing them as the “good way”, the identities of that given culture will not be valorised but instead will be depreciated and diminished, which does not contribute positively to children's development.

On the other hand, conceptualising development as a universal and linear process which depends on universal characteristics can be quite detrimental. If we consider the normative of “good development” only coming from countries in the West and the North hemisphere of the globe, it means that other perceptions of “good development” coming from other realities have been left out and do not belong to the norm.

For many children childhood is a very troubled time, unlike how it is presumed it should be. A lot of children face abuse, violence, war, maltreatment, hunger, and other life threatening situations which for many signifies a sort of “lost childhood”. Following this sense, the contemporary rights movement focuses on the priority and

regulations of a child's life in order to make childhood as Sommerville describes it a "carefree, safe, secure and happy phase of human existence" (Boyden, 1997: 191). Such regulations have expanded in different parts of the globe, making childhood a sort of "universal category" which needs to be protected from international and state mechanisms. It is now a general acknowledgement that goes beyond the borders of Western societies that issues such as children who live in the streets, child prostitutes, children suffering from hunger etc. are considered as threatening to the "childhood experience", leading these children with "no childhood".

On the other hand, it should be important to underline that different cultures have different perceptions towards childhood and especially when speaking about children in the Global South, life realities differ significantly with children growing in the Global North and more specifically in Western countries. By signing standardized and universal declarations of children's rights, all the signing member states take on the responsibility to monitor and regulate childhood and child welfare. "Whilst international law has traditionally embodied the image of the dependent child, the potential victim, many national welfare programmes, in addition to protective measures, contain a large element of control or constraint." (Boyden, 1997:198). Global standards towards childhood often do not take under consideration cultural components or adapt to local sensibilities, which produces disaccord and non-desired results.

Global changes, local realities

Contemporary approaches and discourses towards the implementation of children's rights are based on the universal principle of childhood and as a result, policies and practices that are embodied in everyday life circumstances are also reflected in the relationships between adults and children (Fleer et al.,2012:xvii). The childhood ideology and normative principles derive from the experienced realities of a specific and privileged part of the world and such principles are applied to countries and places where such norms are difficult to be achieved and as Fleer et al. (2012) argue, a one-sided minority world endorsement of the so called "good practice" and good norms of childhood means that local realities, practices, cultures and meanings towards childhood are marginalized (p. xvii). A lot of communities do not fit the expectations of "good practice" of childhood and as a result they are failing to meet the global norms. This can be quite a tricky interplay between global forces and local practices which can lead in detrimental aspects towards the development of children. Global discourses and practices towards children's rights have evolved greatly since their genesis but nonetheless the ideology towards children's rights still remains somehow constructed according to narrow perspectives of childhood.

"Whilst contemporary approaches in social work in many industrialized countries may have moved a long way from these beginnings – setting social problems more firmly in the context of social structure and organisation – their influence can still be seen in welfare practice in a large number of countries, in the South especially, and is

gradually having the effect of creating a universal standard of childhood.” (Boyden, 1997:198)

Global discourses and policy practices regarding childhood contribute to a new construction of childhood since existing realities and practices are being transformed and go through a process of metamorphosis. Such transformations and changes towards child rearing or protection politics are different in different contexts, and the outcomes of applying a universal model of childhood differ significantly from one context to another. The dominant force which determines the rights movement, as post-colonial and critical whiteness studies demonstrate is the white western child ideal, which represents the norm imposed to the rest of the children in the world. One of the main intentions of whiteness studies, as mentioned in Clarke & Watson (2014) by citing Shome, is to show how “the everyday, invisible, subtle, cultural and social practices, ideas and codes that discursively secure the power and privilege of white people” (p.70). Therefore, understanding and challenging “whiteness” is necessary, in order to consider not just one model of childhood but many *childhoods*. According to post-colonialist and critical whiteness perspectives (see Ploesser & Mecheril 2010), the figure of the child and related discourses that construct the child, are understood under the perspective of ‘colonising the child’ where the other-child is produced as a subject. Bühler Niederberger & van Kriken (2008) note that the concept of childhood can be seen as a social structural character similar to class, race or gender. ‘Childhood’, therefore is also a product of power relations and as Foucault (1971, 1980) articulates, power discourses affect our way of perception towards categories and what we accept as being “normal”. At the same time Foucault also argues that power relations are involved in dynamic processes and therefore that are subjected to change.

Globalism is changing the very idea of childhood, making children also more active in the sense of being seen as future consumers. While spreading ideals of global education standards as well as ideals of how a child should be raised and what constitutes a good development. On another level, globalised media plays an important role in terms of children’s culture. Images of children are omnipresent in commercials, TV-programs, movies, etc. and nowadays marketers are interested in getting into the child’s world at the very beginning and into shaping the child’s views and preferences and most importantly make this child a future consumer. Children have become more and more important, not only as consumers themselves but also for their purchasing influence. On the other hand, as Buckingham & De Block (2007) articulate, such global media influences have contributed in creating a sort of discontinuance in terms of cultural and moral values. “Commercial forces are seen to have disrupted the process of socialisation, upsetting the smooth transmission of cultural values from one generation to the next. According to the critics, globalisation will inevitably result in the construction of a homogenised global children’s culture” (Buckingham & De Block, 2007:78). The issue here at stake is the kind of culture

which is currently being promoted and popularized, which does not reflect aspects of different cultures but rather offers a westernized version of the ideal culture.

Distributing a global culture on the other hand rises important questions in terms of the distribution of cultural values and the continuity of existing cultures. Many communities do not agree with a lot of ideas in the models that are offered as the standard which needs to be followed, claiming that a lot of things coming from the 'West' are disrupting their way of teaching children and bringing them up under a certain way, according to their cultures. Technology is also changing fast and contributing to faster and easily reachable information, which makes patterns of globalization even stronger.

Montgomery (2001: 80) argues that globalization tendencies and transnational obligations often tend to problematize issues regarding childhood such as child prostitution for example under a narrow perspective, since such issues are rarely as simple as they are portrayed. Following a western model of childhood it means that children have the rights to live a childhood that does not include work, early child marriage, sex, money etc. which does not reflect the reality in which most of the children of the world live. Montgomery articulates that children in developing countries are not able to fulfil this western ideal of childhood and "while setting up an ideal may be benevolent (if naïve) wish, it is dangerous to codify an unchanging standard" (2001:83). The author also explains that during her field work with children as sex-workers in Thailand, she experienced that the reality is very different from what is demanded from the CRC (1989), and that this convention often fails to protect children in the real sense since it does not take under consideration issues such as family support or linking it with global issues of poverty, cultural background and discrimination (p. 87)

"Indeed, Article 9 of the Convention specifically states that if it is in the best interests of a child, he or she can be removed from their parents. Parents who allow the sexual exploitation of their children are, by definition, bad parents and must be punished in order to protect the children. However, this may be harder to justify at the grassroots level, where the situation looks very different" (Montgomery, 2001: 87)

Understanding the local implications under an anthropological perspective is definitely necessary for the process of ascribing rights and implementing policies. A better consideration of rights and making use of all articles in the CRC, without leaving out important components of the cultural backgrounds is crucial. There is no doubt that issues regarding children such as abuse or prostitution are detrimental and that there needs to be an awareness and action towards eliminating what violates children's rights. But, what stands out as absolutely fundamental is to understand that eliminating such phenomena needs a deeper understanding of the complexities involved.

Conclusion

Understanding globalisation and local realities is crucial for acknowledging and practising children's rights. However, the processes involving the implementation of rights can be quite complex and very challenging. Critical engagement with the notion of 'whiteness' can be very beneficial when considering new ways of exploring identities and an empowering children and their communities. Critical whiteness studies, as well as postcolonial perspectives help in the process of understanding the interplays between the dominant groups and the marginalized, by introducing new ways of conceptualisation towards children's rights. Acknowledging local realities and approaching rights from an anthropological perspectives is crucial in resolving dilemmas and mediating between both universal and cultural relativist positions. Such perspectives need to be considered in policy analysis as well as during the process of implementation, since not every context will have the same outcomes. Given this understanding, ascribing rights needs to be a mediated process and not imposed, where also the right holders – children – get a chance to be heard.

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