Expanding horizons: Reimagining local cultures to reflect on global childhoods[i]

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Abstract

In this essay I call for a consideration of global childhoods as a means to locate the lifeworlds of children in contemporary times. Any study of childhood is contextualised, and relational, and it is suggested here that with the advent of globalisation, new technologies, and multimodal meaning making, access to cultures globally provides greater insights into the complexities of our own everyday lives. With more information, we will be able to ensure that all children can reach their full potential as capable citizens of the now.

Keywords: Global Childhoods, Globalization

In the introduction to the SAGE handbook entitled *Global Childhoods,* Yelland, Peters, Fairchild, Tesar and Perez, (2021) stated that the purpose and aims of considering global childhoods was conscious and intentional since we believe that any focus on the lifeworlds of children in contemporary times needs to address all the significant issues that impact on them. Children and their families have become increasingly mobile and interconnected via the use of new technologies in their lived experiences that are now extended beyond their local communities to a global context. In everyday lives, children and their families encounter and extend their range of possibilities to access new ideas and cultures which may cause reflections and changes. These are important catalysts, and for us as educators who want to design schooling experiences, that contain relevant and authentic information relevant to their needs and interests, and are respectful of cultures and ways of being. The provocations posed by Yelland et al. (2021) included asking: Who is the child? Who are children? What role do children play in shaping culture, society, and their own lifeworlds? What are the defining characteristics of childhoods? In what ways are children making a difference to society? (p. xxvi)

Traditionally, in approaches for teaching young children, such as Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) and many curriculum and policy documents (ACARA, n.d.) adults have prescribed what young children should **do** and **know**, and regulate them with mandatory policy imperatives linked to so called 'quality assessments' designed to determine if individual children meet specific targets. If they do not – they are regarded as being in deficit, and in need of interventions with specific dosages of actions to rectify the deficit. My own work – and the work of others have, in contrast, built on Rinaldi's (2007) view of young children as 'capable citizens of the now'. This was evidenced in the edited collection by Yelland and Frantz- Bentley (2018) entitled *Found in Translation,* where all contributing authors illustrate and provide examples of innovative reconceptualist practices in early childhood education. Additionally, Iorio and Yelland wrote an industry report in 2021 entitled – *Defying Deficit,* that called for a more optimistic view of young children, and focussed on building their funds of knowledge (Gonzales, Moll & Amati, 2005) with authentic experiences to extend their curiosity, interests and experiences. In the report we highlighted that the new EYLF in Australia (AGDE, 2022) challenged educators to think beyond traditional approaches to "find new ways of working fairly and justly and to do this by "Drawing on a range of perspectives and theories (that) can challenge traditional ways of seeing children, teaching and learning and encourage(ing) educators as individuals and with colleagues…". We noted however, that taking up these "new ways of working" has been limited by a view that children are regarded as being incapable of contributing and are in deficit with a need to be

fixed, and further, seem to be devoid of a serious attempt to realise the importance of diversity and cultural impact on childhoods.

The industry report (Iorio & Yelland, 2021) contained case studies of what this perspective might look like in action, with an understanding that we would gain greater insights into young children's learning if we understand the cultural nuances that are important for recognising the diversity of individuals, and groups, and learn from them. Such an approach requires interdisciplinary thinking and collaborations from areas such as cultural studies, sociology, ethnography, philosophy and law to uncover the complexities of contemporary times, when too many seem to want simple solutions to challenges we face, and view educational success in terms of numeric results from high stakes tests. In doing so they don't realise the potential of many young children more broadly beyond these tests.

In studying such local experiences and connecting with those of others, we are able to consider global childhoods so that we can better understand the cultural nuances that are important, and significant, for recognising diversity and learn from this. Culture is not static. As we grow, we evolve, modify and extend our knowledge base to learn and consequently in schools, as in society more broadly, we need to recognise diversity and adapt and grow - not standardise it!

The origins of this perspective, or pathway, can be found in the work of the new sociology of childhood scholars from the 1990s who focussed on enquiries into the everyday lifeworlds of children. This was research work **with** children rather than **on** them, and it made space for their voices, opinions and contributions to the collection of data and the analyses of findings.

In the *SAGE Handbook of Global Childhoods* (2021) we said: Our aim is to explore children's lives and circumstances, and the discourses through which the category of childhood is continually re/produced, regulated, contested and reconfigured. We regard this endeavour as being important and inclusive of a range of sites of research inquiry, professional examination, and political activism. (p. xxxv)

The impact of globalization on the lives of children has not been equal in its impact on local economies, relationships with humans and the land, as well as on everyday practices and cultures. For some, the effects of global change have included advantages not previously imagined; for example; new industries which have improved economies and personal opportunities for vulnerable communities. This has included technologically mediated access to increased educational opportunities, and social networking that connects families separated geographically. However, for other communities the global flows of capital, knowledge and people have diminished the quality of their lives, isolated families, communities and degraded local environments. A world in which global capitalism views children as commodities, has for many children around the world, restricted educational opportunities, quashed economically sound futures and, factors such as occupation, poverty, racism, sexual exploitation, geopolitical unrest, and the intensification of environmental degradation have impacted on childhoods in negative ways (Smith, Tesar & Myers, 2016).

Thus, the impact of globalisation, mobility and new technologies has changed the lives of citizens / children locally, and suggested alternative pathways, including a vision of young children as capable, agentic and diverse. It recognises the need to **customise** children's learning experiences, rather than standardise them and avoids comparing children numerically in high stakes tests to make proclamations about the relative success of educational systems.

In this context it is also important to recognise the importance of becoming multiliterate, as this enables children to make meaning and engage in investigations to explore ideas and build knowledge in their everyday lives. As educators we can make this learning visible in learning documentation that explicitly shows their

potential in multimodal formats. *Linguistically*, in texts, *visually* in drawings and movies, with *music, sounds and movement*. High stakes tests give specific information about young children's levels of attainment in specific domains that are deemed to be important. However, we need more detailed information about the type and depth of learning for each individual child as well as describing their collaborations with others. We can do this with *learning documentation* that can show children's learning pathways as well as making their underlying potential visible. This will foreground the depth and richness of their meaning making and knowledge building providing a record of this over time which enables us to view and discuss their learning trajectories, or pathways, with them, and design new scenarios.

Learning documentation becomes the artefacts of learning that teachers, parents and children co-construct and assemble over time. Learning documentation provides *evidence* of learning in the form of drawings, stories (written and oral), project inquiries, and videos of events which are narrated by teachers, with children and parents, to make children's learning processes and knowledge building explicit and visible. It also provides a record and reflection of learning that has taken place, both in individual and group learning contexts, which has hitherto been regarded as being very complex to describe effectively. As such, learning documentation represents an opportunity to achieve synergy and relevance, creating contexts for new ways of doing school, in ways that are grounded in authentic everyday inquiries and experiences and are guided by (national) curricula. Learning documentation provides a basis upon which educators and parents can promote and build young children's capacity to apply their knowledge in an increasingly diverse world, to develop multiliteracies so they can approach the fast-changing world with an open and critical mindset, and learn with effective strategies to increase their knowledge base.

Our aims in studying global childhoods (Yelland et al., 2021) has been to gain greater insights into the lifeworlds of children globally and extend our conceptualisations of the ways in which studies of global childhoods can contribute to educational and social theory - so that we can design learning ecologies that enable all children to thrive, reach their full potential and show their strengths in successful interactions with others.

Conceptualizing global childhoods then, encourages a worldview of childhoods that is not universal but regards children as capable, agentic and unique. We might reflect on how our individual and collective efforts can be used to focus on the ways children's and communities' own values and knowledge systems – their funds of knowledge – can be incorporated in our early childhood learning ecologies.

This perspective leads to many provocations and potential reconceptualizations of issues related to; how we view children, what is the function of schooling, and what is our role as early childhood educators in the lives of young children, their families and communities. *Defying Deficit* (Iorio & Yelland, 2021) recommended that a government funded professional learning system was integral to support teachers as researchers, who would be encouraged and mentored to engage in research as part of their everyday professional practices. The provocations that follow might be included as part of teachers ongoing professional conversations with colleagues, policy makers, families and communities. It is through such dialogs that possibilities are derived which work for individual communities, and when shared globally might offer other communities ways of thinking differently about the challenges that they face. It will also involve a recognition that there are not always simple solutions, but rather possibilities and consensus, that reflect principles of equity, social justice and the realisation of potential.

Such provocations might include

- How do diverse realities impact on the ways in which we might do research with children and families and how we think of what research is – and what is it for?
- In what ways do prevailing views of childhood shape what children experience in schools?
- How do we persuade policy makers and governments that learning is complex and that making learning visible should occur in a variety of modalities?
- How can learning documentation co-exist with high stakes testing to create alternative evidence of young children's meaning making and knowledge building?

Expanding our horizons by considering and reflecting on global childhoods enables us to think more creatively about the lifeworlds of young children and how we might contribute to advocating for a world in which they are all provided with opportunities and resources to reach their full potential to become whatever they want to be.

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