The Disablement and Enablement of Childhood

Introduction

Many educators, like ordinary people, appear to hold the view that children are distinct from adults, and dependent on them for protection, supervision, and decision-making. This idea of childhood distinctiveness and dependence is typically concomitant with a universalization of the concept of childhood – a view that childhood is much the same across historical and cultural boundaries – promoted by mainstream developmental psychology (Kincheloe 2002). It is generally assumed that such dominant conceptions of childhood are justified and beneficial because they are believed to serve the interests of children. However, it is doubtful whether this assumption is valid, considering, for instance, the following two questions. First, some early childhood educators have argued that the predominant knowledge base grounding the field actually serves to maintain the status quo, perpetuates stereotypes and prejudices about children, and ignores their real life (Cannella 1997). Second, developmental psychology is often criticized for not appreciating the diversity of childhood, and thus equating difference with deficiency and cultural construction with natural fact (Kincheloe 2002). After all, how do children come to be regarded as qualitatively distinct from and essentially dependent on adults? Do the dominant beliefs and practices concerning children do them justice, leading to increased

acceptance and opportunity for all?   In the following discussion, I first examine how the dominant views of childhood are constructed in the field of sociology, highlighting the constructions of children as playful, vulnerable, and passive.   Then, following Jacques Derrida, who conceives of justice as a source of meaning for deconstruction, I deconstruct, or problematize, these taken-for-granted views, together with their associated practices, in order to expose the social injustices children face.   Finally, I explore how justice can be restored to children through reconstructing the concept of childhood, stressing the importance of establishing a coherent public policy on promotion of agency in children and also the importance of empowering them to participate actively in education.

Construction of childhood in sociology

Notwithstanding the multiplicity of constructions of childhood in various disciplines, the prevailing view is that children are *incompetent* in the sense of lacking rationality, maturity, or independence.   Within the discipline of sociology, in contrast to such developmental psychologists as Jean Piaget who constructs children as biologically determined creatures developing through a series of inevitable, age-related, and culturally universal stages, social constructionists see childhood as a social construction, rather than a simple biological given or an obvious social fact, that is 'interpreted, debated, and defined in processes of social action' (Corsaro 2005, 7).   In

other words, within a social-constructionist framework, there is not a single absolute conception of childhood, but a multiple, relative, and changeable one that varies between cultures and societies. Nevertheless, since children are generally in a subordinate position in society in relations or interactions with adults, a number of social constructionists maintain that childhood is basically a product of what adults think and do: children are brought into being through the dominant discourse – including ideas, concepts, knowledge, and modes of speech that constitute social practices and institutions – created by adults.

A good example of such discourse is the association of childhood with play, in contradistinction to work, which is said to be characteristic of adulthood. The assumption underlying this construction of the 'playing-child' image of childhood is that children are incompetent, showing emotional, cognitive, and social immaturity that precludes them from having responsibilities (including economic responsibility as a family member and social responsibility as a citizen) and thus from working in terms of earning an income (Wyness 2006). As children are free from responsibilities or work, they play. Indeed, the 'playing-child' or 'non-working-child' image is rather common throughout the world. For one thing, it is widely represented in national practices, like children's exclusion by law from claiming an income from the state because they are not expected to work as

unemployed adults are.   For another, it is globally represented in transnational institutions such as Disneyland, which projects itself as a playground for both children and adults, and in regard to which, Hunt and Frankenberg (1997) observe that 'In Disneyland, adults also are allowed to re-experience an ideological reconstruction of partially remembered childhood where idling time away in play is legitimated' (122).

Another prime example of adult-made discourse about childhood is the representation of children in the media as innocent, passive, and vulnerable.   This representation is commonly found in news coverage wherein emotive images of children, to whom any agency or voice is denied, are used to illustrate adult news items, such as stories about disaster and the impact of war (Davies and Mosdell 2005). What is noteworthy here is that it is not without consequences to construct and propagate – through the media – the discourses of childhood innocence, passivity, and vulnerability.   A case in point is the images of children as victims presented in media campaigns against child sexual abuse: sexually abused children are portrayed not only as innocent victims whose innate innocence is 'betrayed' or 'shattered', but also as passive victims who are 'silent sufferers' with little or no capability of taking action to cope with the problem (Kitzinger 1997).   In consequence of the media dissemination of such images of children as victims with a primary focus on their vulnerability or incapacity, strong protectionist reactions are often produced among the adult

population, who typically call for a tighter control of children's everyday activities (e.g. forbidding them to go out alone or at night), viewing restrictive measures as protective means for preventing child sexual abuse.

In fact, such a protectionist approach to children based on constructing them as vulnerable or incompetent is also prevalent in the legal world − another highly influential institution dominated by adults.   For instance, in the UK, while children are classified as 'vulnerable witnesses' under the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999 so that they may be physically protected behind screens or videotapes when giving evidence in criminal trials (Levy 2001), the law of torts treats children as lacking competence to foresee risk and exercise self-restraint so that it makes allowances for their negligent behaviour even though they are liable in the same way as adults in principle (Bagshaw 2001).   A far-reaching consequence arising from this poor opinion of children is that they are usually denied the right to have a voice in decisions that affect them.   An important area where children's rights to participate are particularly weak is education.   To illustrate how education law fails to recognize children's participation rights, Blair (2005) points out that the Education Act 1996 in the UK grants all parents an unconditional right to withdraw their children from sex education without giving children a voice in their parents' decision.

The chief reason for excluding children from decision-making in law is that this

is in line with the welfare principle, or protective of their best interests. Ironically, however, the legal focus on children's welfare does not involve serious consideration of their views. As Sclater and Piper (2001) put it,

> If what the child wants and what is perceived to be in the best interests of that child coincide, the decision will reflect the child's wishes; where they do not coincide, the judge's view prevails. In the latter case, the paramountcy of welfare may cause the child to feel doubly excluded. (418)

And what is more, in the context of family proceedings, children may be given such a feeling of 'double exclusion' even by the welfare practitioners who are supposedly responsible for listening to them and enabling their voice to be heard: these practitioners, for whom children's welfare is a top priority, '*cannot* properly give effect to children's wishes and feelings where they conflict with their "best interests" (as defined by adults)' (McNamee, James, and James 2005, 242). Here, the welfare discourse clearly reflects the dominance of adults over children in the construction of children's best interests. Indeed, the powerlessness of children vis-à-vis adults in law is attributable to the inferior status accorded to them – on the basis of age rather than competence – as minors or non-adults, who are regarded, for many legal purposes, as dependent and vulnerable subjects in need of protection.

Deconstruction of childhood for justice

The chief inference to be drawn from the above inquiry into representations of childhood in sociology is that children and childhood are constructed as such by adults, at least in the Western world.   Adults, having enormous social and political power over children, can define the reality of children by shaping and restricting the ways in which it is possible to talk and think about issues concerning them in society. But the key question is, does the adult-made reality of childhood reflect the true state of affairs fairly and adequately?   A useful way to address this question is by deconstruction, for it typically seeks to transform the taken-for-granted (e.g. representations of childhood) into the problematic through the revealing of power, competing interests, and conceptual or theoretical privilege (e.g. underpinning the representations).   More specifically, as a method of reading texts, deconstruction involves identifying the underlying assumptions, ideas, and frameworks that form the basis for thought yet are often dressed up as fundamental ahistorical truths, with a view to subverting the apparent significance of texts through uncovering contradictions and tensions within them.

Deconstruction may be seen in particular as a critique of what Derrida (1976) calls *logocentrism* – the authoritarian structure in (philosophical) texts that establishes a series of hierarchical binary relationships in which the dominant term / concept (e.g. *speech* being conceived by Plato as an authentic means of approaching truth)

marginalizes the subordinate one (e.g. *writing* being seen by Plato as an inadequate medium for conveying truth). One of the deconstructive strategies adopted by Derrida to subvert the binary logic in logocentrism is the unmasking of the 'logic of supplementarity' – the reasoning that the marginalized subordinate term / concept (*supplement*) is necessary for forming the identity of the dominant one (*presence*), which, therefore, is never as complete and authentic as it is claimed to be. For example, speech, claimed to be a self-presence, needs the metaphor of writing, as its supplement, to make up for its absence. As the binary logic, which organizes ideological constructions in logocentric ways, tends to perpetuate discourses and practices of domination, such a deconstructive attack on it illustrates the paramount importance Derrida (1997) attaches to *justice* for deconstruction:

> That is what gives deconstruction its movement, that is, constantly to suspect,
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> to criticize the given determinations of culture, of institutions, of legal
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> systems, not in order to destroy them or simply to cancel them, but to be just
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> with justice, to respect this relation to the other as justice.   (18)

In other words, it is justice that gives deconstruction momentum and meaning. Given that justice from a Derridean perspective is a concern for the other, or the otherness which is concealed, excluded, marginalized, and suppressed, deconstruction is well suited for answering the question of how to do justice to a similar concern here,

viz. childhood.

Children as playful

The central problem here is that, within the social-constructionist framework, children and childhood are institutionalized mainly on the basis of age as essentially distinct from adults, particularly as playful, vulnerable, and passive. To start with, it is questionable to claim dichotomously that children play and adults work − hence the construction of childhood as workfree and carefree − on the assumption that children cannot, and thus should not, work. For one thing, from ancient times to the present, numerous children have demonstrated their ability to work and have had substantial economic responsibilities in different parts of the world. Indeed, child labour still persists on a massive scale and is not confined to developing or poor countries: recent global estimates indicate that worldwide there were some 211 million economically active children aged 5-14 (constituting 18% of the total child population in the same age group) in 2000, of whom 2.5 million were found in developed or rich countries (International Labour Organization [ILO] 2002). For another, given the wide variety of contexts in which children work, it is not impossible to argue that they should work (and certainly not by argument from is to ought). By way of illustration, McKechnie and Hobbs (1999) point out that children may gain such benefits from employment experience as self-reliance, economic and business knowledge, a sense of autonomy,

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and a positive sense of self-esteem; and Woodhead (1999) reveals that many working children feel proud of their work and perceive it as 'an inevitable and necessary part of growing up, as a contribution to their family and their future prospects' (46).

All of this is not to ignore, of course, the awful circumstances and consequences of children working in areas deemed the worst forms of child labour by the ILO convention of that name. After all, a simple out-of-context appeal, say, to even the highly relevant and influential Article 32 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989), which states that each child has the right to be '*protected* [italics added] from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development', in support of the counter-argument that children should not work, is hardly justified; because the Article in itself reflects a demand more for protection of children from exploitative, hazardous, and harmful work than for a reduction or elimination of their economic activities. Admittedly, play is an integral part of children's life, at least in the sense that they readily convert nearly any activity, whether it is serious or tedious, into play. Yet, the construction of the 'playing-child' or 'non-working-child' image of childhood reinforces a tendency to downplay, ignore, or deny the reality of the prevalence and complexity of child labour. This does a

disservice to the protection of working children from exploitation and harm, to say nothing of the comprehension of complicated and critical issues like how multiple dimensions of work relate specifically to their health, educational achievement, and psychosocial adjustment, as well as how economic and political changes affect their work patterns (Miljeteig 1999).

Children as vulnerable

With regard to the construction of children as vulnerable, it arguably has a connection with the discourse of innocence, or their representation as innocent. Indeed, according to Meyer (2007), a problem with the discourse of innocence lies in its conflating innocence with vulnerability and constructing both as *innate* characteristics: through the portrayal of vulnerability as innate to children, the discourse of innocence (re)produces unequal power structures that generate their structural and social vulnerability (as a lack of power in adult-child relationships and of social experience respectively) which, in the form of 'circular discursive dynamics' (91), is frequently interpreted back as an indication of their innate innocence. Such representation of children as innately innocent and vulnerable implies that they are constantly – due to their incompetent nature – at risk and thus in need of protection.

Paradoxically, however, the protectionist approach to children is all too often not really protective but even counter-protective. One good example is that, in response

to the image of children as innocent and vulnerable victims disseminated in media campaigns against child sexual abuse, some protectionists' call for locking up children at home may actually put them at increased risk, given that many of them are sexually abused in their own families (Kitzinger 1997). Moreover, using the notions of innocence and vulnerability to provoke public revulsion at child sexual abuse, as Kitzinger points out, is also problematic in at least two ways. First, innocence is an ideology that serves to deny children access to knowledge, about sex in particular (even telling them about incest is seen as corrupting childhood innocence), making them more vulnerable to sexual abuse. Second, vulnerability, depicted as an innate characteristic of children, diverts attention from their socially constructed oppression, especially their structural dependence on parents (intensified by those government policies in housing, employment, and education which increase parents' responsibility for, and rights over, their children) whose, say, increasing control over their sex education 'is, potentially, in direct conflict with their protection from sexual exploitation' (ibid., 175).

Another example is that the legal construction of children as vulnerable within a welfare discourse to safeguard their best interests often only legitimizes their views being either inadequately sought or completely overruled (Sclater and Piper 2001). This legal safeguard appears not so much to protect as to exclude children,

considering they are seldom given opportunities to speak to, let alone being listened to

by, those who make decisions about them so that they can neither actively influence

the outcome nor clearly reveal the protection they want. Here, a question arises

whether the welfare discourse actually operates in the interests of children in that

'protection may be suggested even when it is not strictly necessary for the sake of

children, but rather works to protect adults or the adult social orders against

disturbances from the presence of children' (Qvortrup 1997, 87). Echoing such a

possibility of adult agenda behind the protectionist approach towards children, Sclater

and Piper assert that the dominant welfare discourse which positions children as

vulnerable victims in divorce can serve both the psychological and political needs of

adults: it not only enables adults, or parents, to project their vulnerable feelings onto

their children as a psychological defence mechanism to protect their own ego, but also

provides a political justification for state interventions in divorce that is generally seen

as within the private sphere of the family, such as state promotion of divorce dispute

resolution through mediation, even though the promotion aims tacitly to cut down

public expenditure on litigation.   This kind of psychological and political support the

welfare discourse can offer adults perhaps explains why it is so difficult for children

to shed their vulnerable image in law.

Children as minor

What is noteworthy here is that it is in law rather than in the ageing or maturing process per se that adults achieve 'adulthood' and, correspondingly, children 'childhood'. More specifically, once children attain the age of majority, whatever their maturity, they are given the whole gamut of legal rights and responsibilities generally available to adults. However, fixing a chronological identity for adults in this legal and artificial way within the life course is beset with problems, two of which I identify here. First, it is arbitrary in both the sense that the age of majority is different in different places (e.g. 16 in Scotland, 18 in China, 19 in Alabama, and 21 in Singapore) and at different times (e.g. 21 before, but 18 after, the enactment of the Family Law Reform Act 1969 on 1 January 1970 in England) (James and James 2004); and the sense that many laws (e.g. those currently stating that a child can legally vote at 18, have sex at 16, and consume alcohol in private at 5 in the UK) apply arbitrarily with little consideration of whether the child is really adult enough to indulge in such activities (Fionda 2001). Second, it poses a formidable obstacle to the empowerment of children: legally granted the status of non-adulthood, children are 'deemed to be not competent, to be dependent and thus subject to the hegemony of adult views and judgements' (McNamee, James, and James 2005, 234); moreover, the supreme authority of law renders this artificial, age-based status difference between adults and children apparently natural and therefore particularly resistant to challenge.

In fact, it is arguable that the idea of standard adulthood as a definite state of completion in life is only a myth, considering the social and economic changes resulting from, say, the extension of schooling and the postponement of work in modern societies.   As Furstenberg, Rumbaut, and Settersten (2005) observe, not only is it not possible for most children to achieve psychological and economic autonomy as early as it was a half century ago (i.e. by the end of their teens), entry into adulthood in the contemporary Western world tends to be more ambiguous and occurs in a gradual, somewhat complex, and less uniform manner.   To describe such an ambiguous yet critical period of transition between childhood (or adolescence) and adulthood, special terms like 'adultolescence' (Tyre, Springen, and Scelfo 2002) and 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett 2000) have been coined: while *adultolescents* refer to those in their twenties and thirties who are still living with and receiving financial support from their parents, *emerging adults* refer to those in their late teens and early twenties who, having left the dependency of adolescence but not yet entered the enduring responsibilities required of adulthood, characteristically continue to explore their identity beyond adolescence through trying out various life possibilities in the areas of love, work, and worldviews.   With regard to the latter, ironically enough, Arnett (2004) has found that most emerging adults view such criteria as *accepting responsibility for the consequences of one's actions*, *deciding on personal beliefs and*

values independently of other influences, and *becoming financially independent from parents*, rather than *reaching age 18 or 21*, as necessary achievements in order for one to be regarded as an adult: hence the somewhat arbitrary significance of chronological markers that the law values to their subjective sense of attaining adulthood.

Children as passive

It is, furthermore, problematic to construct children as passive: with the advent of a new paradigm in childhood studies, wherein childhood is understood as a socially constructed and culturally specific phenomenon (Prout and James 1997), children can hardly be seen as just the passive products of universal biological and social processes, but as active participants in the determination of their own social lives, that is social agents. However, being a social agent means more than simply taking concrete actions in society as a social actor. It also means exercising social influence through 'negotiation with others, with the effect that the interaction makes a difference – to a relationship or to a decision, to the workings of a set of social assumptions or constraints' (Mayall 2002, 21). Given that children are subject to the dominating and socializing influences of adults, a question arises as to whether they can really act as social agents. The answer to this question depends crucially on how the relationship between social structures and agency is understood. Relevant questions, according to Dépelteau (2008), include the following. How much respective power should be

recognized in social structures and agency? Are they separated or intertwined properties in essence? How is agency possible if social structures impose themselves on social actors before they act? Does agency originate in individuals themselves?

Co-deterministic theories

As one of the most influential sociologists who attempt to define the relationship between structure and agency, Giddens (1984) conceives of structure as rules and resources that are organized as enabling or constraining properties of social systems, and agency as the capability rather than the intention of individuals to influence a specific state of affairs or course of events. Moreover, he asserts that structure and agency are mutually constitutive of each other in the sense that social structure shapes (i.e. enables / constrains), and is shaped (i.e. produced / reproduced) by, human action. In terms of the notion of the *duality of structure*, Giddens emphasizes that structure and agency should not be represented as a dichotomy but a duality: 'the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize' (ibid., 25).

Sensible as it seems, Giddens' insistence on the mutual constitution of structure and agency is criticized by Archer (2000) for severely limiting their utility in practical social research in that it precludes one from 'disengaging the properties and powers of

the practitioner from the properties and powers of the environment in which practices are conducted – and … this prevents analysis of their interplay' (6). Accordingly, instead of putting emphasis on duality, Archer (1995) proposes conceptualizing structure and agency as separable categories by *analytical dualism*, which maintains that not only are general structures and agents analytically separable (because their emergent properties are irreducible to each other), specific ones are temporally distinguishable (because they occupy and work over different tracts of the time dimension). For her, it is the latter premise of analytical dualism that can be used methodologically to examine the interplay between structure and agency over time. Based on two temporal propositions, that structure necessarily pre-dates the action bringing about its transformation or reproduction, and that structural transformation or reproduction necessarily post-dates the action leading to it, the method is captured as a morphogenetic / morphostatic sequence in which structures condition action (structural conditioning) first, then actors act upon both constraining and enabling structures (social interaction), and finally the pre-existing structures are transformed (structural elaboration / morphogenesis) or maintained (structural reproduction / morphostasis).

Here, an empirical study by Hitlin and Elder (2007) seems to lend some support not only to the contention that human agency occurs at varied stages – including

childhood and adolescence – of the life span (Macmillan 2007), but also to two key

aspects of Giddens' and Archer's theories respectively.   Drawing on a large sample

of adolescents, Hitlin and Elder validate their model of agency as basically, like

Giddens', 'a human capacity to influence one's own life within socially structured

opportunities' (ibid., 57), yet, like Archer rather than Giddens, 'find analytic

possibilities to disentangle individual agency from social structure' (ibid., 39).   More

specifically, they have shown that agency, as measured in their empirical model,

comprises two factors, viz. self-efficacy (the perception of oneself as having power

over one's environment) and optimism (the belief that actions taken now will have

positive results in the future), and can be enhanced by social support networks as well

as individual capability to make advantageous long-term plans.

Relational theories

The co-deterministic theories of Giddens and Archer, which interpret the evolution of

the social world as the result of interactions between agency and social structures,

receive considerable support in contemporary sociology.   However, many theorists

contend that the reality of the social world is more faithfully reflected by relationism

than by co-determinism.   Dépelteau (2008), for example, conceiving any individual

action as 'always one piece of a moving puzzle composed by interdependent actions'

(60), asserts that relational theories perceive the social universe correctly as the result

of trans-actions between various interdependent actors. He presents a critique of

Archer's morphogenetic theory, which he regards as a sophisticated representative of

co-deterministic attempts to define the relationship between agency and structure.

According to Dépelteau, Archer's theory has two major problems. First, Archer

reifies agency in the sense that she attaches agency to independent actors and explains

it as an individual property. But, in reality, relational theories suggest, agency is the

empirical effect of social processes or relations that are constituted by interdependent

actors through their trans-actions. In other words, agency cannot be seen as simply

an individual property intrinsic to actors. Whether specific social actors and actions

are agential depends on the nature of relevant empirical chains of trans-actions.

Indeed, Dépelteau argues that, from a sociological perspective, individuals and other

'trans-actors', e.g. individuals, knives, and mountains, take their properties only

through trans-actions. As he puts it,

> An individual is a soldier full of hate, a knife is a weapon, and a mountain is
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> a defensive wall or an obstacle, etc. when there is a war. In another
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> trans-action, the same individual is a 'loving machine', the mountain a
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> romantic view, and the knife might become a gift. (Ibid., 63)

This point is aptly illustrated in the landmark legal decision of the UK's House of

Lords in the case of *Gillick v. West Norfolk and Wisbech Area Health Authority* (1985),

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which ruled that children under the age of 16 have the right to consent to medical treatment without their parents' knowledge or consent when they attain sufficient intelligence and maturity to comprehend and assess the nature and implications of the advised treatment (sometimes known as '*Gillick* competence').　 What is remarkable here is that although the *Gillick* decision is thought to be conducive to children's exercise of agency by many legal scholars – e.g. Freeman (2001) and Eekelaar (1986) hold that the significance of *Gillick* lies in its recognition of adolescents' diverse capacities and of children's autonomy interests respectively – whether or not children can act as agents in real life still hinges on the trans-actions they are involved in.　 For one thing, the appraisal of children's competence, no matter how great it actually is, is determined by 'complex and varied social contexts within which children of different ages are facilitated or hindered in giving their consent' (James and James 2004, 160). For another, even if children are judged *Gillick* competent, their decisions on medical treatment can still be overruled under certain conditions: for instance,

> a *Gillick* competent child's refusal of medical treatment can be overridden
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> by a consent given by a person with parental responsibility…. as long as the
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> person with parental responsibility acts within the limits of her power, that is,
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> in the best interests of the child.　 (Lewis 2001, 154-155)

In other words, being (*Gillick*) competent does not necessarily make a child become

an agent; any agential property, instead of being intrinsic to an individual child, is brought into being only through trans-actions.

The second problem of Archer's theory, for Dépelteau (2008), is that it treats social structures, e.g. family, school, culture, racism, etc. as static givens, as if they have a fixed structure like a building. But in actual fact, social structures are always in a state of flux in that, relationally speaking, they refer to specific trans-actions which are more or less similar, continuous, and reproduced through time and space: hence the failure of Archer to see adequately the fluidity of social structures. Such relational understanding of social structures as fluid seems to be echoed by a group of neuroscientists, experimental psychologists, and developmental psychologists who share a transdisciplinary principle known as the principle of *developmental biocultural co-constructivism* (Baltes, Rösler, and Reuter-Lorenz 2006). In general terms, it states that 'brain and culture are in a continuous, interdependent, co-productive transaction and reciprocal determination' (Baltes et al., 3). More specifically, it stresses that brain and culture are not mere passive recipients of input from each other; instead, all entities involved in their development are deeply interwoven and affect each other in cumulative ways, with the developmental outcome being one of collaborative production and reciprocal modification. Indeed, following this principle, due to the continuous transactions, the continuous structural

and functional changes of the brain, and the continuous social and cultural changes of

the environment, events long ago can indirectly influence the current activity state and

thus behaviour of the individual, as can more recent events.

A profound implication is that whether children can currently act as agents

depends on the dynamic exchanges between their nature (i.e. brain) and nurture (i.e.

culture). However, it should be noted that children's nature – commonly thought to

be essentially distinct from adults' – of today is, in all probability, substantially caused

by adults' long years of nurture. The reason is, as Baltes et al. (2006) suggest, that

the anatomy of the brain [in today's children] that seemed so unchangeable

in traditional neuroscientific thinking derives a part of its stability from the

similarly rigid and well-organized conditions [under adults' control] in the

physical and social environment and their cumulative and adaptive influence

on the early childhood development of the brain. (34)

More importantly, evidence is growing that even adults' nature in terms of their

brains' structural and functional organization – long believed to be 'hard-wired' by the

age of puberty – can be influenced by sociocultural factors. For instance, many

recent studies have shown that augmented environmental complexity can stimulate

the growth of new nerve cells in the hippocampus (a brain structure primarily

involved in memory and learning) of adult brains, and that the brains of adults who

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become blind after an accident can change the function of the visual cortex (a brain region originally responsible for sight) into tactile information processing (Li 2006). Considering the deep significance of both children's and adults' brains, or rather mindsets, to the development of agency in children, such structural and functional plasticity of the brain, which extends beyond early childhood to adulthood, opens up possibilities for sociocultural influences to be integrated into the individual's cumulative developmental history that engenders mind and action across the lifespan. After all, the recognition of the *dynamic* character of social actions as central to the constitution of social structures in biocultural co-constructivism is a crucial insight, for it allows one

> [not only] to consider both change *and* continuity as central features in the social construction and reconstruction of childhood …. [but also] to see this as potentially achieved through both the intentional and unintentional actions and interactions of children, as well as adults, as a feature of generational relations and as depending on any number of personal, social and cultural factors.   (James and James 2004, 40)

Reconstruction of childhood as a way to justice

Given the enormous influence of adults on children in various spheres of life, it is obviously inadequate to rely solely on children's efforts to take on the role of

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initiators of change in reconstructing childhood.   Adults also have a vital part to play: bringing about a transformation in culture by establishing a coherent policy, especially public policy, of empowering children.   Indeed, the importance of policy-making should not be underestimated in that 'policy works to delimit the conditions of possibility and the arenas of restraint through which meanings are given to social practice and, ultimately, to ideas of the person' (James and James 2004, 45).   In other words, it is at least partly through experiencing the process and result of policy that people usually come to understand the social status and personal identity of themselves and of others.

Empowering children to participate actively

A promising way of promoting agency in children at the policy level is to empower them to participate actively in various settings.   The rationale behind this method is that the *participation* of children enables not only adults to make better-informed and thus more child-centred decisions, but also children to acquire the vital skills of, say, negotiation and conflict resolution for agency.   However, how can the *empowerment* of children to participate be achieved?   It requires both a proper recognition of the power relationships of adults with children at issue and a critical analysis of the forms of adult support needed by children.

With regard to the former, on an institutional level, a system of 'divested' power,

instead of 'invested' power, should be adopted: while an invested power system, which is hierarchical, linear, and competitive, rewards individual success, a divested power model, which is corporate, democratic, and collaborative, values organizational change (John 2003).   Given that the transformation of power seen in the divested power model entails a change in the nature of power (from invested power to divested power) rather than the balance of power (between the more powerful and the less powerful), this model is particularly useful for the empowerment of children.   The reason is that, in contrast to the invested power system in which a transformation of power involves adults in transferring their power to children, i.e. disempowering themselves to empower others, and therefore arouses possibly their resistance to the transformation, taking a divested power approach 'does not involve loss of power so much as a renegotiation of the nature of it so that everybody's view counts' (ibid., 52).

Moreover, on an individual level, effective ways of talking with children about structural power – a core concept that would help them to identify and comprehend the ways in which they might be oppressed – should be explored.   To be sure, many adults might have reservations about doing so, perhaps because they believe that 'identifying the odds stacked against children might be "disempowering", making them feel helpless and vulnerable: to name power is, [after all], to create it; to identify power is to activate it; once acknowledged its force increases' (Kitzinger 1997, 182).

Yet, at least in the context of child sexual abuse, Kitzinger argues, it is through discussing power with children that one might explain to them why some children 'passively' obey abusers and why some are still abused even if they 'actively' resist, and that one might assure them that the responsibility for abuse lies with the abuser rather than the child.

With regard to the latter, in general, apart from organizing child services (like children's ombudsperson offices and child welfare services) in such a way as to increase the possibility for children to demonstrate their competence in self-advocacy, adults should support children in their self-advocacy efforts by providing them with the means to survive (including financial and political resources) independently of those adults who have harmed, or are likely to harm, them (Grover 2005).   There are two points here that are worth noting.   On one hand, to foster the participation of children in these services, the surroundings need to change to suit the children, not the other way round (Cockburn 2007).   That is to say, public spaces have to be able to accommodate their voices in suitable forms (e.g. using information and communications technologies to facilitate communication with them in a non-intimidating manner) without tokenism.   Unfortunately, negative examples are not difficult to find.   A recent one in the UK was concerned with the child protection system for handling child abuse cases: Sanders and Mace (2006) found that the

current child protection conferences, which followed a formal procedure and were long organized on the basis of the requirement for maximizing communication between adults, were hardly child-friendly but essentially adult-oriented and intimidating: hence their conclusion that children's participation in the conferences was no more than a token gesture.

On the other hand, the means of survival provided for children may range from the direct financial support that young carers need – in the absence of the opportunity to partake in paid work due to unpaid care responsibilities for family members – to increase their ability to consume goods and services so as to attain a higher degree of social inclusion (Dearden and Becker 2005), to the indirect political support that working children need – especially finding ways of including representatives for them in international proceedings – to engage in dialogue and negotiation with adults so as to protect and promote their own interests in paid work (Miljeteig 2005). Considering that social exclusion stems from 'the interaction of a range of issues including lack of money, … lack of access to participatory processes and a lack of opportunity to access employment' (Davis 2007, 141), these means of support for children's work, whether unpaid or paid, are crucial to their active participation in society. After all, as Hungerland, Liebel, Liesecke, and Wihstutz (2007) conclude from their study, work, in so far as it is undertaken without compulsion, constitutes an

important element in children's 'participatory autonomy': it offers the opportunity for them to act independently and contribute significantly to society.   Indeed, while the self-earned money in paid work can not only help emancipate children from their dependence on their parents, but also serve as a conscious contribution to their families and public charities, the independent contribution in unpaid work, which children undertake to take pressure off their parents or other people, can help them gain approval, self-esteem and, above all, acceptance.   Accordingly, 'child work can contribute to strengthening the children's social status and furthering their active collaboration in society' (Hungerland et al., 276).

Education

The preceding paragraphs demonstrate clearly that the processes of engaging children as participants carry political implications for existing institutions: various institutional arrangements have to adopt a divested power approach and encourage adults to share power with children.   What is essential to creating such arrangements is the process by which properly reconstructed knowledge of childhood is effectively communicated to the community.   Yet, since educational institutions themselves play a pivotal role in reconstructing the understanding of childhood, it is particularly important to consider how children can be empowered to participate actively in these influential institutions so as to do them justice in the reconstruction of childhood.

A pessimistic view of schooling

Unfortunately, quite contrary to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the

Child's (United Nations 1989) expectation of preparing children for active

participation in a free democratic society, the school as commonly institutionalized in

many societies across the world has hardly proved an ideal venue for children's

democratic participation: numerous schools routinely marginalize rather than involve

children in decision-making processes, whether the decision is big or small, offering

them very limited opportunity to practise what they are supposed to learn, i.e. how to

take part in and influence the making of democratic policy. Schooling, as Wyness

(2006) observes, can hinder the development of children as democratically competent

citizens in at least two ways. First, schooling, especially compulsory schooling,

tends to reinforce negative images of children as innocent, dependent, and

incompetent through excluding them from the workforce: they are considered unable

to earn money, or to gain (financial) independence, owing to their innocence and

incompetence: hence the weakening of adults' motivation – both inside and outside

school – to engage children in democratic decision-making. Second, schooling

reinforces the subordinate status of children in society through imposing various

structural constraints on them in school. For example, while the school curriculum

determines to a large extent what children learn in class, it is the school regulations

that largely govern how they behave in school: hence the strengthening of children's

views that they are not expected to control anything, or to act as agents of change, but

to be controlled by adults, at least in school.

A need for taking children seriously in schools

Children's widespread experiences of oppression in schools at different levels,

through lack of opportunity to have their voices heard, confirm John's (2003)

argument that the neglect by conventional educational practices of developing

children's ability to negotiate their own conceptions of reality leads to the exclusion of

children from any sense of power. As she puts it, 'Being totally ignored is the

ultimate in powerlessness; it means one does not count, that one's existence is

immaterial – it is as if you were not just a "lower" but not even a person' (ibid., 52):

hence her use of the term 'unpeople' to describe the powerless children.   However,

the question is, considering being a citizen is an ongoing learning process in which

what happens in school gives meaning to children's comprehension of what it is like

to be an active citizen (Smith 2007), how can children be expected to suddenly

become active participants in society when they are grown up if they are treated as

unpeople or 'uncitizens' in school?   An obvious answer to this question would be to

reverse common oppressive educational practices, i.e. to respect children's right to

participate in education and thus to empower them to act as active agents in schools.

In fact, the results of Smith's research on how children are encouraged and supported to be active participants in early childhood, primary, and secondary educational settings in New Zealand have shown that this is not an impossible task: although some of the attempts to respect children's participation rights in these settings were more successful than others, there is ample evidence that it is possible for even preschoolers to exercise their participation rights if they are provided with the right support and opportunity, e.g. for taking the initiative and playing responsible roles.

Here, according to Holdsworth (2005), it is crucial that children are taken seriously as participants in schools *in the present*. It means that schools should enable children to do serious things that draw on their knowledge and competences in the present, instead of devaluing children's present situation and experiences by deferring the outcomes of learning (e.g. by telling them, 'Learn these abstract concepts because they will be useful to you later', or 'Learn about citizenship because some day you will be a citizen'). More specifically, Holdsworth emphasizes that the meaning of student participation should go beyond 'playing a part' (in something over which students may have no control), or 'having a say' (in something where students' views may not be acted on), to engaging in activities that are valuable and make sense to three objects of significance, viz. the students (who work on issues of their choice), the community (which recognizes the issues as important ones to be worked on), and

the curriculum (whose goals for schools are fulfilled by the participation). To illustrate his point, Holdsworth elaborates on the arenas of school governance and school curriculum in which student participation is developing well in Australia – an exemplar of the ways in which children can be taken seriously in schools. In the arena of school governance, students are taken seriously in their representative or direct participation in school decision-making on educational issues through their being on such bodies as curriculum committees, school councils, or regional boards; and in the arena of school curriculum, students are also taken seriously in curriculum planning through curriculum partnerships between teachers and students in 'setting goals, canvassing needs and background, identifying appropriate content, devising learning methods and putting appropriate assessment and evaluation measures in place' (ibid., 148), and through curriculum projects, especially community development projects in which

> students create resources and services of value to their communities. Examples have included cross-age or peer tutoring in which students teach other students; [and] media productions in which students have produced community newspapers and directories, resource guides, oral histories, or radio and television programmes. (Ibid., 148)

Conclusion

To sum up: the construction of children as incompetent in the sense of lacking rationality, maturity, or independence – hence their inferiority and subjection to adults – by adults from different walks of life does not do justice to childhood. This is reflected in the process of deconstruction which problematizes various taken-for-granted conceptions of childhood through revealing the assumptions, ideas, values, contradictions, and power that underlie them. As a way to restore justice to childhood through its reconstruction, children should not be constructed as workfree and carefree, in which case the building of the 'playing-child' or 'non-working-child' image of childhood reinforces a tendency to downplay, ignore, or deny the reality of the prevalence and complexity of child labour. Nor should they be constructed as innately innocent and vulnerable, arising from which the protectionist approach to childhood is all too often not really protective but even counter-protective. Moreover, considering its arbitrary nature in application and disempowering effect on children, the common practice of legally fixing a chronological identity for adults within the life course, or rather giving children the whole gamut of legal rights and responsibilities generally available to adults once they attain the age of majority whatever their maturity, should be challenged. And, in order to explain properly how children can act as social agents rather than passive objects under the dominating and socializing influences of adults, the relationship between social structures and

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agency should be understood in terms of relational rather than co-deterministic

theories; hence the interpretation of the evolution of the social world as the result of

trans-actions between various interdependent actors rather than of inter-actions

between structure and agency. Last but not least, at the policy level, agency in

children should be promoted by empowering them to participate actively in various

institutional settings, especially schools.

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