Competition or integration? The next step in childhood studies?

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Abstract
This article argues that childhood studies has reached a crossroads in its development because of the growing diversity of the interests and agendas that are now being pursued under the interdisciplinary umbrella of childhood studies. As a consequence, fault-lines are beginning to emerge in what was once a unified project, reflecting tensions between key areas and theoretical positions. It goes on to outline a model for reconceptualizing childhood studies that weaves these different positions together, making them necessary and interdependent components of the same field rather than competing and potentially exclusionary perspectives.

Keywords
agency, childhood studies, plurality, singularity, structure

Childhood studies is approaching a crossroads, reaching a point in its history and development when searching questions must be asked about how the field is now perceived and whether there is any longer a shared understanding of what was once a unified project. The Oslo Childhood 2005 conference, for example, revealed the enormous diversity of interests now being embraced under the single umbrella of childhood studies, raising the question of how to make sense of it as a single endeavour. This diversity was evident not only in the number of people attending, but in the variety of papers and workshops, and the range of issues being addressed: on the one hand, there were papers concerning children’s rights in the global south, reflecting the major impact that the children’s rights movement has had upon childhood studies, while, on the other, there was a plethora of papers reporting small-scale research projects about children as social agents in one setting or another.

As Allison James recently argued, there is now a proliferation of studies representing:

. . . the voices of children, revealing things that are important to them. Personalized and individualized, the children tell us about their everyday experiences of the social world and
reveal . . . the hidden hurts and humiliations that many children experience and which adults often dismiss as unimportant or regard simply as playground rough-and-tumble.

This kind of work has been replicated in any number of studies about any number of topics by any number of social scientists. (James, 2007: 264)

This is not to suggest that such research is not valid in its own context and frame of reference – it does, however, require us to reflect upon the extent to which a continued proliferation of studies that demonstrate, yet again, the fact that childhood is socially constructed and that children are active social agents in the construction of their own childhoods, contributes either to the furtherance of our theoretical understanding of childhood or the development of childhood studies. What seemed to be absent at the Oslo conference, however, was any substantial body of contributions that sought to enhance our theoretical understanding of childhood.

These issues were later underlined by Ennew (2008) at the 25th Anniversary of the Norwegian Centre for Child Research (NOSEB) in Trondheim. In a powerful presentation, she explored the appalling plight of homeless and stateless children in South-East Asia, underlining an apparent dissonance between such issues and the concerns of those who study childhood in the western world. In highlighting the failure of the child rights movement and the UNCRC to protect such children, it was hard to deny the implication that the concerns of European scholars about childhood were somehow more trivial when compared to the enormity of the problems faced by children and young people in the majority south. The clear dichotomy between these endeavours lies not only in terms of their focus, however, but also their value – to children. And in spite of the fact that they have grown from the same roots, they now reflect very different positions within childhood studies, the power of Ennew’s argument being founded on the view of children (and thus childhood) as a social good.¹ The question therefore arises as to whether they can both be accommodated within the same enterprise, or whether we are witnessing the emergence of a fault-line within childhood studies.

Even a brief reflection on the concerns of childhood studies in Europe makes it hard not to recognize the power of the moral argument that the plight of so many children in the global south should command much greater concern, attention and study than, for example, kindergarten policies in Scandinavia, changing children’s culture in Germany, or the reconstruction of childhood in the UK. Yet at the same time, such a comparison seems unfair and must be resisted. This is because the justifiable humanitarian concerns and agendas of those who are concerned about children’s rights in the global south address fundamentally different concerns from those who seek to understand the nature and diversity of childhood and its social construction, wherever it may be studied, privileging protection and provision at the expense of participation and also, arguably, action at the expense of analysis. It must also be resisted because such ‘structural concerns, especially if linked too closely with political agendas, could divert us away from the conceptual task of understanding childhood as a participatory social space’.²

This article therefore seeks to explore these issues and tensions, which have brought childhood studies to this crossroads, and to consider whether such a fracturing of the field is inevitable; whether the proponents of these different perspectives, with their different agendas, need to consider taking different paths; or whether, by reviewing and
thinking afresh about the nature of childhood studies and reconstructing this in the light of the developments that have taken place, it might be given a new sense of direction by binding together the tensions that threaten to pull it apart.

**Competing constructions of childhood: The plurality vs singularity debate**

The Oslo conference also saw the emergence of a separate, rather different and perhaps more explicit, dialogue about the nature of childhood studies. This dialogue centred on a more theoretical tension within childhood studies but one that has equally raised the question of what we mean when we speak about childhood studies and whether we can continue to ignore the differences that are emerging in this exciting new area of interdisciplinary study.

On the one hand was the work by James and James (2004), which sought to build upon the pioneering original explication of the socially constructed nature of childhood that framed the new paradigm of childhood studies (James and Prout, 1990) and its subsequent elaboration (James et al., 1998). James and James set out to develop and expand this paradigm by seeking to identify some of the missing elements in the analysis of the relationship between structure and agency and to specify some of the mechanisms linking the two through which social change and social continuity occur in relation to childhood. They developed the notion of the cultural politics of childhood – the combination of national and therefore cultural contexts, social practices and political processes through which childhood is uniquely constructed in different societies at different times – and identified the pivotal role of law as the institutional embodiment of social practices, both in the construction and the regulation of childhood. Through this, they sought to bridge the theoretical gap between structure and agency, but also offered a model for beginning to understand and analyse the social construction of the multiplicity of childhoods that exist in the world through which a degree of theoretical unification might be achieved within childhood studies.

In 2005, Qvortrup responded to this argument in an important paper in which he challenged the increasingly dominant focus within childhood studies on the plurality of childhoods, at the expense of focusing on the universality of childhood as a social category. He contended that the increasing emphasis on the plurality of childhoods was obscuring the overriding importance of childhood as a social category and its structural significance in terms of generation and intergenerational relations. He argued that:

\[\ldots\] the promoters of the plurality thesis typically belong to the social constructionist mood or the post-modernist strands of social research with strong reservations against so-called grand narratives and generalisations and thus against what they see as unitary or even deterministic explanations. They have a strong sense for perceiving the society as complex and therefore for avoiding simple – or in their view: simplistic – explanations, which at the end of the day typically leads to a preference for uniqueness. Each childhood, therefore, is a unique childhood with its particular points of reference which cannot fully be shared by others’ childhoods. (Qvortrup, 2005)
He described this as a ‘clash between the plurality thesis and the singularity thesis of childhood(s)’. This highlighted a further emerging tension within childhood studies revolving around competing paradigms, epistemologies and values, which suggested that it was becoming increasingly difficult to think about childhood studies as an integrated endeavour. Importantly, his critique centred on the argument that by focusing on the complexity and multiplicity of childhoods, the political power of the singular category of childhood, which lies in its ability to draw attention to the way in which children everywhere are marginalized and made invisible in social and economic policy, was undermined and weakened. In this, Qvortrup implicitly acknowledges the impact of the historical shift away from meta-narratives in the social sciences that coincided with, or perhaps facilitated, the emergence of the new paradigm.

Thus another potential fault-line emerged in relation to what the focus of childhood studies should be. Should it be on the commonalities of childhood – those things that are common to children everywhere by virtue of their structural position and the nature of intergenerational relations? Or should it be on the diversity of childhoods – the recognition that, in terms of their lived experiences, children’s childhoods differ enormously within any given society, let alone when international comparisons are made? In other words, to use Qvortrup’s expression, what is the significance of ‘the little “s”’ in childhood studies?

Such debates among academics are nothing new. Although there are obvious differences (in their history and structures, for example), similar processes and arguments are evident in the development of other discourses, such as feminism and the women’s movement. In order to establish itself discursively in its early days, both politically and academically, this focused unwaveringly on the simple gender dichotomy between men and women, since this was essential in order to highlight the gross differences between the two, thereby to establish the raison d’etre of feminism and the legitimacy of the political agenda of the women’s movement. As Qvortrup (2005) argues, it was necessary for the movement to insist that ‘women first and foremost had something in common which cut through classes’. Only once this became firmly established was it possible for feminism to develop more sophisticated analyses recognizing the diversity of womanhoods, without endangering the feminist project. Indeed, it is arguable that not only did this further development become possible once feminism had become established, it was both desirable and necessary if the intellectual and theoretical vigour that had provided the foundations and impetus for the original movement were to be sustained and developed.

Thus Qvortrup’s position suggests a belief that, as yet, childhood studies is not yet firmly enough established to abandon the political power of the singularity thesis and that by diverting attention away from childhood as a social category and from the significance of generational relations, the project of childhood studies is somehow put at risk. In this, we can perhaps see echoes of Ennew’s position – that by focusing on the plurality of childhoods, we put at risk the children’s rights project, which seeks to establish basic levels of provision, protection and rights for all children and particularly those in the majority south. In short, for some there is perhaps a fear that the operation of a crude cultural relativism, rooted in the plurality thesis, will diminish the political power of the category of childhood for the analysis of children’s position vis-a-vis adults, and thus for...
the recognition and effective enforcement of children’s rights and provisions for their welfare. In order to avoid this fate, therefore, this argument suggests that it is necessary to focus on what is common to children, rather than on how they differ. The singularity vs plurality dichotomy and the incompatibility between these is thus further emphasized suggesting, as with the tension between structure and agency, that it is at the very least highly problematic, if not impossible, to integrate the two within the single enterprise of childhood studies.

Can we therefore continue to talk of childhood studies as a single project? It is not a discipline, as such, since the ‘new’ social studies of childhood has developed as an area of multidisciplinary research and theorization, bringing together academics from different traditions, disciplines and epistemological perspectives because of a shared interest in children and childhood. Its nature as a multidisciplinary project and the challenges that it has had to confront in its search for a new paradigm are described by Pufall and Unsworth, who argue that this search could be satisfied:

. . . only by a model of interpretation that both embraces and then reaches beyond the distinctive conceptual apparatus of these different disciplines. Thinking in terms of a new paradigm requires an intellectually self-transcending effort. For those of us participating in this project, that was one of its principal values. Our religious or social scientific or philosophical or scientific or educational or historical or legal languages had to be used as a means of communicating across disciplinary boundaries because children’s lives cannot be fully captured inside any one of them. (Pufall and Unsworth, 2004: 6)

But as is often the case with such projects, it may be that the point has been reached where it has now become necessary to acknowledge and confront the tensions and incompatibilities between the different languages, perspectives and agendas that have so far constituted it and to ask what has been the impact of such epistemological plurality? Is it possible to develop new approaches that will allow the development of divergent positions but also maintain the integrity of the childhood studies project? Will such critical reflection serve only to weaken and undermine its integrity? Or is it now possible to begin to integrate some of these perspectives, to move beyond the neat distinctions but potential schisms made by the construction of dichotomies?

**The case for complexity**

Before seeking to answer this question, it might be useful to consider some of the major dichotomies that figure in discourses about childhood. Indeed, as Prout (2005) has argued, childhood studies emerged from the dichotomous opposition of culture and nature. Yet in spite of Prout’s argument that because ‘childhood studies draws on post-structuralist writing it directly challenges the dualisms of modernist social theory and in this sense points the way to escape their dominance within the sociology of childhood’ (Prout, 2005: 63), such dichotomies continue to figure prominently in its configuration. I have already referred directly to some - structure vs agency, the industrialized west vs the global south, childhood vs childhoods and, implicitly, global vs local – and there are many others.
In many ways, such dichotomies are valuable heuristic devices: they enable us to compare and contrast important structural and theoretical concepts, to highlight their key features and to map out their interrelationships and interdependencies. They are also, however, false dichotomies. While they help us to understand some things, they serve to obscure others, such as the complexity of the experiences of individuals, who bring together and contain, in many different ways, the tensions between these dualities in their daily lives. As Hengst argues, dualistic thought:

... is always at risk of failing to perceive complexities, simultaneities and periodicities. Binary codes, whether manifest or latent, are ill-suited in particular for perceiving and comprehending a globalized reality in which everything is intermeshed. (Hengst, 2005: 21)

This can be illustrated by a brief consideration of the most widely used dichotomy, which informs the very basis of childhood studies – that of adult vs child. The foundational importance of this dichotomy was made evident by Jenks, when he observed that:

The child . . . cannot be imagined except in relation to a conception of the adults, but essentially it becomes impossible to generate a well-defined sense of the adult, and indeed adult society, without first positing the child. (Jenks, 1996: 3)

And yet as Prout contends,

Generational relations and life course are constructed through their partial dependence and connection with a multitude of different entities. . . . This argument implies that, alongside other oppositional dualisms, the distinction between childhood and adulthood is not itself taken-for-granted. Rather it should be problematized and the attempt made to understand how and why the distinction arises. (Prout, 2005: 144)

What closer consideration of this particular dichotomy reveals therefore, is that, as with those referred to above, this is not so much a dichotomy as a continuum; as soon as we look closely at the adult–child ‘dichotomy’, we have to engage with the debate about when childhood ceases and adulthood begins, regardless of the fact that, in generational terms, they both occupy distinct places in the social structure. This difficulty is reflected in the fact that, although the UNCRC is clear in defining children as any person below the age of 18, we find it necessary to talk about, and therefore to distinguish between, children and young people. This suggests that the category of childhood is fractured not just by the different social constructions of childhood in different political, cultural and economic contexts, but also by the significance of different ages within childhood. The danger of emphasizing age differences, however – and this may be one of the reasons why this difficulty is seldom made explicit in childhood studies – is that it draws us perilously close to the developmental perspective, a perspective that was directly challenged and largely rejected by the new paradigm that informed the social study of childhood (James and Prout, 1990).

This is, nonetheless, a nettle that must be grasped. In so doing, however, we can remain resolute in our rejection of a hegemonic developmental perspective by engaging
with those realities of social life and social practices that constrain us to distinguish, as we do on a daily basis, between children and young people and to recognize the problematic nature of the boundary between childhood and adulthood. Thus, for example, the English language distinguishes, for various purposes, between a newborn, an infant, a babe-in-arms, a toddler, a child, a tween-ager, a juvenile, a teenager, a youth, a kid-dult, a young person and a young adult. Some of these distinctions are, of course, determined primarily by context – for example, the term juvenile is most commonly associated in western industrialized societies with delinquency (James and James, 2008) and the tween-ager with the increasing commodification of childhood (Cook, 2004), while others, such as infant or babe-in-arms, reflect the attribution of clear, broadly age-based, social and relational differences within the supposedly unitary phenomenon of childhood. Some, however, such as kid-dult, reflect the growing uncertainties surrounding traditionally accepted divides between children and adults. To engage with such age-based distinctions, which vary from culture to culture, does not mean that we must accede to the influence of developmentalism; however, to ignore the social reality of such distinctions by seeking theoretical refuge in the singularity thesis would be to sidestep a major theoretical challenge that clearly faces childhood studies. Instead, we must move beyond the struggle between competing theoretical positions and engage in the task of developing a conceptual framework that will enable the integration of what are, all too often, presented as oppositional perspectives.

**The limitations of singularity**

In a more recent paper, Qvortrup (2008a) reiterates his concern about the risks associated with privileging the diversity perspective, arguing that:

> In principle any priority of perspective will tend to marginalise other perspectives. While it is a legitimate right for any researcher to choose perspective and focus, one should be aware that maximising one perspective necessarily leaves other perspectives in the lurch.

Nonetheless, he goes on to argue the case for bringing together perspectives which, while they may appear to be contradictory, are not necessarily antagonistic. He illustrates this position, drawing on the work of Chris Jenks, by suggesting that childhood studies must, of necessity, start from the perspective that children are set aside from adults. He therefore goes on to argue that ‘before embarking on our inspection tour to our many childhoods we need to come to terms with what childhood is as a category’ (Qvortrup, 2008a; emphasis in original). As he goes on to explain,

> . . . in children’s being set-aside-from-adults, childhoods proliferate! They are set aside from adults in different ways, but set aside they are. As a tendency they are all set aside from adults – that is their structural position, which is not altered simply because you are able find cases where they are not set aside.

The important point here is of course that we cannot start proliferating into a plethora of childhoods until we have got a grasp of what childhood is – and one good proposition to this effect is that children are as a collectivity set aside from adults. (Qvortrup, 2008a)
Such a focus on the structural space of childhood and the way in which children are being set-aside-from-adults has led some scholars (e.g. Oldman, 1994; Qvortrup, 2008b) to argue that children’s education in industrialized countries can only be understood in the context of their progressive removal from the workforce and that, in the wake of that process, children’s activities as learners must now be understood as work. Thus what children do in the name of education at school represents society’s investment to ensure their future productivity, for as Mayall contends, ‘Children can be understood as acquiring, through interaction with teachers, the skills and knowledge required for their effective participation in social life and in paid work’ (Mayall, 2002: 172).

Indeed, as Qvortrup argues in the context of developing a case for children to be treated as social citizens,

... their main activity – school work – should be acknowledged on a par with other endeavours that contribute to the social fabric. Most important is that, from this perspective, children’s school work is regarded as being as much for the benefit of the collective as for the individual, a perspective that may influence discussions about who should bear the costs of investment in children and childhood. (Qvortrup, 2008b: 228)

Thus children’s work at school is not only useful, it has an economic value that can be used to justify state support for families with children in education. This perspective is valuable in that it focuses our attention very clearly on childhood as a structural and generational space. It is, however, predicated upon a view of children’s futurity – that investment in children’s education is an investment in the future, not just of individual children but also the future of their parents and the community more generally. By prioritizing a structural perspective, children’s experiences of education, the meanings they attach to it in the here and now, and how they exercise their agency within the education system in a way that gives it meaning to them and which, in turn, also has an effect on the system itself, are marginalized.

Towards the (re)integration of childhood studies

The challenge, then, is to incorporate these different perspectives not only into ‘a grasp of what childhood is’ but a related understanding of what ‘childhood studies’ is, so that the childhood studies project can integrate these into the fabric of childhood studies as a whole. This use of the word ‘fabric’ is carefully considered, since I want to use the analogy of weaving in order to suggest a way in which the different threads that separately contribute to what we refer to as childhood studies can be woven together and integrated into a single piece of cloth, the basic dimensions of which are bounded by the recognition of children as set-aside-from-adults but which incorporate, and therefore enable us to focus on, analyse and understand, both the commonalities and the diversities around which childhoods proliferate.

To develop this analogy a little further, in weaving, the warp of a fabric comprises the threads that are extended lengthwise in the loom, which are usually twisted harder and are therefore stronger than the weft. Thus they provide the foundations of the material and it is the number and length of the strands in the warp that determine the dimensions
of the material being woven. The weft comprises the threads that cross from side to side of the material, running at right-angles to the warp threads with which they are interlaced. In proposing this as a model for understanding the complex but integrated nature of childhood studies, I envisage the warp as the commonalities of childhood, the stronger analytical and conceptual strands from which the fabric is made and that run through all aspects of the fabric of childhood, and the weft as the finer strands that create the detailed patterns that describe the diversities of childhood.

Thus it is the structural commonalities of childhood that provide the common threads that permeate the fabric of the social category of childhood and which are used to define childhood structurally, as a separate generational space, and to set children aside from adults. In other words, although structural influences do not cause or produce common experiences of and impacts upon childhood, they must be fundamental to any analysis of childhood since any and every childhood is built around the structures and institutions of the society and culture in which it exists as a social space; any childhood is situated within whatever system of social stratification operates in that society; any childhood is built around gender, as it is understood in that particular society; any childhood is part of a set of generational relations with older age groups; all children have parents in one form or another and are socialized in one way or another – the details will vary but the process is common; and similarly, all childhoods are shaped by politics, law and economics. Such social-structural dimensions thus provide the warp for the fabric of childhood as a social space.

It is through the threads of the weft, however, that the pattern of the cloth is created, detailing the diversities of childhood. Perhaps first, by virtue of the complexity it creates, is the issue of chronological age, although there are many others. As argued already, it is important to be able to analyse and understand the way in which age (and the social descriptors of age such as those listed earlier) acts as both a filter for the impact of issues such as gender, as well as a determinant of how any given child experiences their daily life at a given age. Without the necessity of engaging with developmentalism, this allows us to compare, for example, how a 3-year-old girl and a 13-year-old girl might experience their childhoods differently, in spite of the many commonalities they share in a given society. It also allows us to explore, within the common boundaries of childhood and childhood studies, the emergence and significance of new categories of childhood that might arise as part of the process of social change – for example, the emergence of tween-agers in western industrialized countries – and the impact of globalization on children of different ages. It is therefore the detail created by such strands that reveals the diversities of childhood and the patterning of children’s lives, and the contribution that such factors make to the fabric they help to weave in conjunction with children’s agency, which helps to shape these very same diversities and to shape their daily experiences, as well as their dealings with adults, and how they view and understand these encounters.

It is important to note that this is not just another formulation of the structure vs agency debate since, as the above rationale makes clear, the threads of the warp of the fabric – the commonalities or structural determinants of childhood – while clearly providing some of the major determinants of childhood as a structural and generational space, can also produce different childhoods. In addition, the threads of the weft – the diversities of childhood – that create the detailed patterns in the fabric and the many
childhoods that exist are comprised of far more than just agency. Rather, such an approach provides a model for recognizing the importance of both macro and micro issues in the analysis and understanding of childhood, rather than insisting on the primacy of either one or the other.

In terms of constructing research and of analysing social policies and social practices in relation to children and childhood, this has some important implications. Rather than simply focusing on and exploring the experiences, relationships and agency of a child or group of children at a micro level and charting what differentiates these from those of other children, such an approach would require us to chart how that child’s experiences are framed at a macro level by the commonalities of childhood – social stratification, culture, gender, generational relations, etc. – that set them aside from adults, before exploring the impact of their agency and of the many other factors that create the diversity of their daily lives in different social, cultural, religious, political or economic contexts. The importance of this lies in the fact that it enables us to focus upon and understand the ways in which children’s agency is not only constrained but can also be enabled by structural and other influences and that, although children may be set aside from adults, they are not, should not and cannot be set apart from adults.

The new paradigm has produced a growing body of research that has explored the weft of the fabric – the detailed picture of children’s agency, voices and social worlds in the school setting (e.g. Alderson and Goodey, 1998; Christensen and James, 2001; Cullingford, 1991; Etheridge, 2004; James, 1993; Mayall, 2001). Embedded in such studies is an exploration of child–adult relationships but the central theme, derived from the new paradigm, is that children ‘are not passive recipients but active constructors of their classroom community’ (Etheridge, 2004: 101). In addition, however, attention must be given (and has been in some studies, e.g. Blasco, 2005; Boykin and Allen, 2004; Mayall, 2001) to the foundational strands of the warp of the fabric – to issues of generational relations, children’s culture and economic backgrounds, and to the political context in which education is provided, in order to understand education in the context of childhood, as well as childhoods.

Examples of integration

To illustrate how such an approach might work, we might consider one or two of the commonalities, the warp, of childhood – for example, gender and social stratification. At each and every point, these particular common strands of the analytical warp will intersect with the diverse strands of the weft. Thus, if we look at children’s experiences of parenting, we can explore whether their experiences differ according to their gender or their position in the social hierarchy (be this caste, clan, socioeconomic status of parents, or whatever is the prevailing mode of social stratification); we can explore how and to what extent children (of different ages) are able to use their agency to mediate the effects of gender or social stratification, either in terms of their daily lives or their longer term life chances; we can consider how children of different genders and from different positions in the social hierarchy are regulated, both formally and informally; and we can ask questions about whether male and female children have the same or different rights and responsibilities and, if so, how this affects their experiences as children and the extent to
which their use of agency can be a factor in modifying their experiences. Such an approach not only avoids the pitfalls of dualistic thinking, it privileges neither the commonalities of childhood nor the diversities of childhoods and it allows our enquiries to range across the entire fabric of childhood studies, from whatever our perspective, without asserting that any one element of the fabric is more important than any other.

A rare example of the beginnings of such an approach can be found in Connolly’s study of young boys’ experiences of schooling in Northern Ireland. In this, he seeks to consider children’s lives not only in the context of traditional socialization and developmental models of childhood but,

...to foreground the subjective worlds of the children themselves... draw[ing] attention to the ways in which racism represents one of the many particular contexts within which young children actively come to develop a sense of their own gender identities and to think about others. (Connolly, 2004: 5)

On the basis of his research, he argues that:

It is clear that gender has only a partial role to play in influencing the differential patterns of achievement between boys and girls... social class and ethnicity have much more of a profound impact upon the chances of pupils succeeding in education compared to gender. (Connolly, 2004: 218)

Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, however, Connolly also highlights the deeply ingrained nature of the masculine identities of the boys in his study, describing how they came:

To internalise the social relationships around them into an increasingly durable and taken-for-granted set of habits. ... While it is not something innate nor biologically-fixed, the boys’ masculinity is therefore something that is deeply-rooted and experienced as if it is innate and fixed. (Connolly, 2004: 219; emphasis in original)

Implicit in this analysis is the need to combine an understanding of the commonalities of childhood – in this case gender – with an appreciation of the impact of the social relationships that shape individual behaviours and identities. As Connolly argues, his approach:

... draws attention to [children's] ability to interact with their social environment and adapt and reconstitute their behaviour from one context to the next. ... Their identities were therefore not simply determined by their age but also by their ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality. These all came together within specific contexts to provide the background against which children developed their sense of identity. (Connolly, 2004: 187)

Thus by adding to the warp of the structural issues the detail provided by the weft, as Connolly has sought to, we can also begin to understand something about children’s understandings of and the meanings they attach to their experiences of school and their
school work. By studying their educational experiences at a micro level, not only can we learn about the relevance of their current school experiences for their educational achievement, we will learn about the impact of these on them and their families, and how this varies depending upon the diversities of children’s lives rather than the commonalities of childhood. We might also learn about the significance of different approaches to parenting in relation to education, and the impacts that these might have on children’s school ‘work’; we might learn how and why different children value differently the ‘work’ they do at school as opposed to the paid work that many do outside school; we might learn about the reasons for children’s investment or lack of investment in their education; and we might come to understand, through the eyes and voices of children, the importance of children’s rights in relation to education, how they understand these and what they see as being their responsibilities in relation to the ‘work’ that education represents.

We might also understand, to elaborate upon Qvortrup’s analysis of the economic value of children’s school work, something about the hidden costs of schooling for children and families, not only in terms of the widely varying economic costs (both direct and indirect) to families in different economic and cultural contexts – for example, the cost of fees, learning materials, uniforms, the loss of child labour, etc. – but also the emotional and relational impact of the sacrifices made (or not made) in the context of decisions about schooling. It is through such details that children’s experiences of education become diverse, differentiated and imbued with personal meaning by each child, in spite of the commonalities they share.

Such an approach also has the advantage of enabling us to address the significance of differences in children’s age, as revealed by the wide range of descriptors we use to differentiate within the category of childhood without falling into the trap of developmentalism. Thus, we might take the commonality of generational relations as the warp of the fabric and focus on the weft by looking at the experiences of being a tween-ager or a young adult in the context of their rights, their responsibilities, their agency, or their citizenship. Such issues can then be explored, understood and differentiated in the context of generational relations, and the discourses that evolve around these, rather than age and development.

Conclusions

Viewing the fabric of childhood studies in this way encompasses all of the different and currently somewhat disparate strands that make up the project. We can focus on the entire piece of cloth and recognize from its shape and dimensions the separateness of children from adults, as well as admiring the complexity of the patterns that are created by the weaving together of the different elements of the warp and weft. In addition, we can choose to focus on any portion of the fabric and analyse it more closely, to see how particular elements of the warp and the weft combine to create a particular pattern, or we can ask ourselves the question ‘If this was woven differently, with different combinations of the threads that make up the weft, would this give us a different picture?’

Such an approach to understanding the nature of childhood studies also allows us to integrate into the fabric of childhood the concerns of those studying childhood in western industrialized countries with the very different issues confronting those working with children in the majority south, without these being seen as oppositional or in competition.
with each other – each makes an important and legitimate contribution to the study of childhood. It also means that not only will the voices of children be heard but that we will also be able to consider how they experience the structural constraints and commonalities of childhood, and how they use their agency to adapt to or modify these in the context of the diversities of their childhoods.

The conceptualization of childhood studies in this way might therefore offer a way forward for childhood studies as an interdisciplinary project, offering the prospect of a structure within which currently competing and even potentially contradictory perspectives can be woven into the fabric of childhood studies, in a way that enables the apparent tensions between them to make a constructive contribution to the structure of the fabric. It also provides a framework within which we can confidently engage in the analysis of some of the more difficult issues, such as the significance of different ages within childhood, without jeopardizing the project as a whole. In the process, it will ensure the continued academic rigour and theoretical development of childhood studies, without the need for creating and sustaining false dichotomies, or sacrificing the potential political power that comes from the recognition of childhood as a single social category, which must be distinguished from adulthood.

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1. I am indebted to Alan Pomfret for this observation.
2. Quoted from a personal communication from Alan Pomfret.
3. These might include, for example, social institutions, social stratification, culture, gender, generation, socialization and parents, politics, law, economics, globalization. However, it is important to note in passing that, as Pomfret has observed, the idea of structure itself is not entirely unproblematic in the context of childhood studies: Prout’s analysis suggests it is about networks; for Qvotrup it is about broad and uniform societal patterns; for Hengst it appears to be about the formation of cultural orientations formed around social groups; while for others it is about social institutions and situations (Alan Pomfret, personal communication).
4. Other strands of the weft might include, for example, parenting (i.e. the actions of parents, as opposed to the fact that all children have parents), regulation and prohibitions, rights, responsibilities, religion, labour, education, and children’s life chances and their use of their agency to modify these.
References


