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THE GLOBALISATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Helen Penn

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How childhoods vary

One of the most puzzling aspects about how children grow and learn is the importance of context. Take a very simple example, that of food. All children need to eat, but how their food is obtained and prepared, when they eat, what they eat, where they eat, how they eat and what they are taught to think about what they eat is almost entirely determined by where they live and whom they live with. A child living in the UK is likely to have a diet high in processed foods, will graze throughout the day and be petulant about many foods; a child in Italy will be encouraged to savour food and consider its consumption as a social occasion; a child living in France will eat to the clock; and a child living in Spain will also eat to the clock, but the clock will be set to a much later time. The staple food – the bulk – that children eat may be based on wheat, rice, sorghum, barley, maize, millet, potato, yam, or many

other kinds of crop. Children living in nomadic groups in very cold regions of the world will thrive on a diet extremely high in animal fat. Those accustomed to one type of food may view another staple food as inedible (I shall never forget being given raw whale blubber in Northern Canada by an Inuit woman, and being told that it was 'soul food' and she always felt better for having eaten it. I could barely swallow it!). In some parts of the world there is a surplus of food, but in many parts of Africa or Asia, a child will typically experience hunger as an everyday aspect of life and will never have a choice about the food she or he eats.

Food preparation and consumption, as Goody (1982) pointed out in his classic anthropological text, are deeply embedded in cultural and geographical contexts. This extraordinary variation in food and eating habits means that it is difficult to set nutritional or any other kind of norms that are possible for all children to follow, except at the very broadest level of generality. Children need certain levels of essential nutrients for growth – although even that minimum level is debatable – but the form in which they obtain them is anything but standard.

The example of food consumption is a metaphor for other aspects of young children's lives. The argument being put forward in this chapter is that while there are some very general features of early childhood, all of them are shaped and modified by cultural context. So much so, that rather than understanding the generalities, it may be more useful to understand the particularities. Bruner argues that 'perhaps even more than with most cultural matters, childrearing practices and beliefs reflect local conceptions of how the world is and how the child should be readied for living it' (Bruner, 2000: xi).

This chapter explores some of these local conceptions of childhood, and then considers how and if they are recognised and acknowledged in the early childhood literature. Ideas and descriptions about early childhood, which are mainly European or North American in origin, are misused to describe childhood everywhere. In describing this process of globalisation in early childhood, that is, the spread of ideas about child development derived from understandings and research in European and Anglo/American countries, I use the terms 'North' (Euro-Anglo/American countries/developed countries/the minority world/rich countries/Western countries) and 'South' (Africa, Latin America, Asia/developing countries/the majority world/the poor countries).¹

¹These categories are not clear cut: there are some countries which do not fit easily into any categories (e.g. Brunei or Qatar). In most countries there is a small elite who are rich even though their country is poor; and, conversely, there are rich countries with some very poor people indeed among their citizens. The terminology shifts with fashion; relatively few people now use the words 'First World' and 'Third World' which used to be the standard terminology. However, the shorthand of 'North' and 'South' is commonly used to describe the large differences that exist between the richest and poorest countries of the world.

Caution about culture

Right at the beginning I want to give a word of caution about using the word culture. 'Culture' is itself a difficult concept, on the verge of being unusable. 'Culture' describes a set of related beliefs and practices of a particular community, although not everyone in the community will understand or practise them in the same way (see Chapter 1). These beliefs and patterns are manifested in surface differences – diet, games, clothes, eating habits and folklore – but they also draw on implicit and embedded assumptions and values, what the historian Catriona Kelly (2007) calls the 'elusive invisible network'. 'Culture' is usually thought of as belonging to a particular geographical space or country, but from a historical perspective, people are always on the move and calamity is always round the corner. As Nederveen Pieterse (2004) has claimed in his book *Globalization and Culture: Global Melange*, 'cultures' are always porous, hybrid, shifting and contradictory and reflect the frequently forced interchanges of ideas and practices that take place over time. For instance, almost all European countries now have large immigrant populations, and even small countries like Ireland or Finland are changing rapidly, so much so that one commentator has coined the phrase 'super-diversity' in order to describe the changes that have occurred in Europe (Vandenbroeck, 2007). On the other hand, in many countries, the nation state is a relatively recent historical imposition, a reflection of past battles and especially of colonialism and empire. Countries like India, Nigeria, Sudan or Iraq or the (now ex) Soviet Union, brought together – sometimes very unhappily – many very different communities, traditions, languages and religions, and talking about a particular country and its traditions is almost meaningless, such is the arbitrariness of national boundaries. So culture is rarely static or unchanging, it shifts from one generation to the next, from one place to another, and always varies over time. It is displayed differently by one individual to another, but is (just about) coherent enough to be recognised and at least partly described. Rather than use the word 'culture' in this chapter, I prefer to use words like 'local community' or 'cultural context' even though these words, too, should be used with care.

International perspectives – a view from the global South

Much of the work in child development focuses at a micro level, about the understandings and interpretations of what children can do and the kinds of explanations that can account for their behaviour. LeVine and New point out that the study of child development has been largely confined to 'America, Europe and other Western countries who comprise less than ten per cent of all children in the world' (2008: 1).

In their recent book they try to redress the balance by collecting together accounts of anthropologists working in unusual (to us) corners of the world. They sum up these accounts as follows:

- Every human society recognises a distinction between children and adults and the age-linked emergence of children's abilities to learn, work and participate in community activities. At the same time societies vary considerably in the way they interpret children's readiness and ability to do these things.
- Schooling is a relatively recent idea. Until the late twentieth century most children participated in economic and domestic tasks; most were involved in multi-age children's groups; and the distinction between work and play was often blurred.
- Childhood environments differ considerably. In material terms, where children live, whether they have water, sanitation and shelter, what they eat and whether they have enough, what kind of healthcare is available to them; and in cultural terms, who they consider to be part of their family, how they speak and who to and in what language, etc. will vary tremendously between societies.
- The ideas of parents are strongly influenced by culture; norms of parenting reflect and help to sustain the moral standards of a community. Parents have strong views about following these norms, yet they also reinterpret them and adjust them to changing circumstances.
- Children are not passive recipients of cultural practices – they are active interpreters. They acquire the conventions of communication and norms of behaviour that give them entrée to their local social world, but they use and modify them for their own purposes.

Some examples of differences

LeVine and his colleagues are trying to broaden the traditional discussions about child development and to point out the narrowness of the knowledge base. LeVine comments elsewhere (LeVine and New, 2008) that what characterises child rearing in the global North is an extraordinary focus on the individual, on an individual child's needs and wishes and preferences. Over and over again advice to practitioners in early childhood guidance manuals stresses that: 'Every child should be treated as an individual', 'each child is unique', 'each child is different', etc. But there are other communities and contexts where the reverse holds true, where collective obligations are prioritised over personal concerns, and what is important is how a child fits into her or his community. Children are, in the words of the anthropologist Paul Riesman, 'learning to be a relative' (1992: 146). Briefly, some alternative understandings of childhood are outlined on the next pages.

1 Individual – collective

The dichotomy between individual and collective, the extent to which the self is seen as a separate bounded individual, or as gaining identity only from nests of relationships, is one of the classic insights of anthropology (Geertz, 1973). In many societies people define themselves in terms of their relationships – as a mother or father or as a brother or a son or a daughter or a sister, or from a village or a community, but never as a unique and isolated individual making his or her own way in the world. In the global North we think it is important to respect individuality; but for others being an individual – on your own and without the constant intimate presence of others – is the worst kind of punishment. From this perspective, sharing is not something which must be painfully learnt – as in so many pedagogic manuals – but something which is as natural and as human as talking and thinking.

Part of this collective ethos is that children are seen as contributors to the household. Everyone pulls together and small children have tasks to do like everyone else. Serpell (1993) described how in his Zambian village, all children were trained to run errands from the moment they could toddle. Paula Fass (2007), the American historian of childhood, has argued that over time, one of the biggest shifts in the interpretation of childhood has been in the amount of time children are expected to work and contribute to the household, or play and be non-contributors to the household. In rich countries the notions of helpfulness and obligation are rarely seen as an integral part of childhood and child rearing. There is a fraught debate around working children. As Fass remarks, some commentators consider it to be morally wrong to 'exploit' children, whereas another approach might value children's satisfaction and pride in being able to contribute to the economy of their household, and be part of a family or community group however young, and whatever the arduous nature of their tasks.

2 Family – community

As suggested above, life for many young children is intensely collective. Families are diffuse and fused into their local community. Wole Soyinka, the Nobel Prize winning novelist, in his autobiography *Ake* (Soyinka 1989) describes his early childhood in Nigeria, and his experiences of compound life. As a small child he was carried on the backs of many women, and as child he remembers some backs as being decidedly more comfortable than others! His book offers a vignette of an utterly communal, although gendered life, where mothers and children were almost, but not quite, interchangeable. Many children slept with his mother in her room, sharing the bed and mattresses on the floor, some of them relatives, others children of friends or visitors who were staying for shorter or longer periods. Other accounts of African childhoods give a similar picture.

By contrast, childhood in rich countries takes place in small and isolated families. It is not uncommon for a mother to say she has never been separated from her child and has had a continuous responsibility for looking after him or her until nursery offers some relief from the 'burden' of parenting. Families are tiny, inward-looking and self-preoccupied; children themselves have become the individual possessions of their parents, a 'lifestyle' choice and a personal investment which may be wisely or unwisely handled. This particular dyadic and narrow model of parenting is continually re-echoed and re-emphasised in the services we provide and the way we write about them, for example in the burgeoning literature about parenting classes.

3 Independent – dependent

These ideas of community, collectivity and family, and the notion of the inseparability of the child from everyday life, produce an understanding of the child as physically and emotionally independent and robust, at least far more so than would be allowed in developed countries. The Australian aborigine writer Kim Scott, remembering his own Noongar childhood in his prizewinning novel *That Deadman Dance* speaks of the confidence, inclusiveness and sense of play of his community, and how this produces a confident outward looking childhood and an appreciation of reciprocity (Scott, 2010). The idea of attachment and the need for a continuous, sensitive caregiver is part of the understanding of infancy in most countries where there is a literature about child development. But in many societies the child is one among many; a child of the community as well as of the family, a person who gives as well as takes. This quotation which I have used many times, because it indicates such an extraordinary difference of interpretation of early childhood, is from the anthropologist Alma Gottlieb, who studied the Beng community in the Côte d'Ivoire:

Chantal, a feisty two-year-old in our compound disappeared from sight many mornings, only to emerge at noon for lunch and then around 5pm for dinner preparations. Although she was too young to report on her day's travels, others would chronicle them for us; she regularly roved to the farthest ends of this very large village and even deep into the forest to join her older siblings and cousins working and playing in the fields. With such early independence even toddlers are expected to be alert to dangerous wildlife such as snakes and scorpions and they should be able to deal with them effectively – including locating and wielding a large machete. (2004: 32)

What Chantal is doing is nearly inconceivable to Euro-American childhood experts preoccupied as they are with adult supervision, physical risk and the need for protective environments in a child's long dependency. Despite her lack of language, at two years old Chantal is secure, autonomous, curious and very capable. She has a sense of direction and a sense of time. She can use tools effectively. She and her parents are

confident that if there is any kind of hazard she is sufficiently competent to deal with it, by recognising and avoiding it or by calling upon others to help her.

4 The world of spirits

A pervasive theme of folklore is the spiritual world. Dead ancestors and animal spirits are part of the understanding of family life and community obligation. The joyous Mexican festival of the Day of the Dead in November is a celebration when the dead come back to life and party with the living. There are street festivals in which people wearing skeleton masks parade with the crowds and effigies of the dead as skeletons, which are surrounded by the offerings of the living. In many cultures, children may inherit the spirit of departed relatives. This animist view, nature as a continuous cycle of birth and rebirth, rather than a belief in the distinctiveness and uniqueness of an individual human life, sits alongside more traditional Christian or Muslim beliefs. In Mexico, for example, the Day of the Dead has been absorbed by the Catholic church and fused with the Christian festival of All Hallows or All Saints day; the dead party inside the church as well as outside of it. This animism seems to represent the antithesis of modern scientific thought, although the contemporary ethicist and philosopher Pete Singer (2001) has also suggested that human life is over-valued when viewed as part of the spectrum of living things on earth.

5 Gender, patriarchy and gerontocracy

Wisdom and knowledge come with age and experience (even if energy disappears!). Especially in a society where almost all communication is oral and little is written down, an old person dying is like losing an irreplaceable book. It would be unthinkable for a child to be rude or cheeky to an older person, to ignore the embodied experience and wisdom that an older person represents. Lack of respect is often seen by many people as part of the damage and corruption imposed by the prosperous societies in the global North.

By the same token, gender differences are often marked. Women in many places are seen as living a different life from men, and these differences are enshrined in language, in dress, in visible as well as invisible ways. 'Equal opportunities' may be an improbable goal in many places. Girls and boys are treated differently, although this does not necessarily mean that either is inferior. It is regarded as *practical* to see them as having different roles.

6 Language

Language encapsulates culture and community. Many languages have more tenses than English, and this in turn requires more subtlety in the interpretation and recapitulation

of events. Other languages are also more heavily gendered, and have many modes of addressing other people when English just relies on 'you' as a main form of address. Some languages are rhythmic and musical, more given to recitation and performance than to private and solitary reading.

Language structures thinking and communication. In one way, children in the South might be regarded as fortunate; often they grow up in bilingual or multilingual environments (Bloch, 2007). Depending on the language you speak, you see and hear the world differently. English is a global language, 'the new Latin' as it is sometimes called. Because English is now so ubiquitous, most native English speakers see no reason to learn another language. But if ways of thinking and relating to other people are built into language, those who are multilingual are automatically at an intellectual advantage. Those who come from oral traditions tend to be acute listeners and to remember accurately. Pre-school and schooling experiences in the North sometimes damage rather than enhance language learning by inappropriate methods, including a failure to appreciate the importance of oral learning, rhyme, chanting and recitation.

7 Being artistic

In the global North artistic self-expression is seen as a form of individuality, rather than as a community undertaking. So in nurseries we value the daubs of young children as a first attempt at self-expression and expect children to be proud if these daubs are displayed to others. But if the artistic expressiveness is a communal one – for example, weaving or choral singing or intricate group dancing requiring complex rhythmic performance, or indeed writing down an ideographic language which requires careful calligraphy on paper – if it is a skill which requires considerable mastery of form before it is recognisable, then it makes little sense to praise ineffectual efforts. Instead what counts is what Barbara Rogoff (1992) has called 'guided participation', a very careful instruction in the correct way to do things and gentle discouragement of what is wrong. It is learning by example, by watching and imitation, rather than by jumping in spontaneously without any understanding of what may be required. The different learning and artistic strategies used in different cultures for young children remains to be explored.

8 Resourced or resourceless

Every year in the UK various organisations provide estimates for the cost of bringing up a child. Even leaving aside the question of paying for childcare, children are deemed to be expensive. They need lots of baby equipment – cots, pushchairs, nappies, high chairs, play pens, baby clothes, baby books, etc. – and lots of toys,

graded according to the child's stage of development. Costs run into tens of thousands of pounds over a few years. Imagine then bringing up a child with no resources, no specialised equipment and not even running water, electricity or sanitation. This is how an overwhelming majority of children in the world are brought up. Their parents make do with the natural resources around them, and children themselves soon become inventive with what exists in their immediate environment. This could be regarded as an impoverished life, and some children are undoubtedly restricted and limited in their opportunities but there are also those who claim that living in the everyday world, whatever it happens to be, is enriching: and on the contrary, being brought up in a sanitised miniaturised child-world is impoverishing. The extraordinary film *Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame* (Makhmalbaf, 2007) about childhood in Afghanistan beautifully illustrates these tensions between the independence and vitality of young children left to get on with their lives, and the truly terrible circumstances of everyday life in a war torn country, which they must negotiate. A number of writers have also tried to track the increasing consumerism of childhood and relate it to changing concepts about play and child rights (Katz, 2004; Fass, 2007).

The globalisation of early childhood

The above examples are just a few of the ways in which child rearing is perceived as profoundly different in the global North and the global South. But globalisation in the sense of the spread of English and the spread of ideas about child rearing takes little notice of such intricacies. In a recent article (Penn, 2011) I track the use of ideas about early childhood by international non-governmental organisations such as the highly influential World Bank, UNICEF, UNESCO, Save US and other agencies which promote early childhood care and education programmes in the global South. There is a remarkable similarity among them, a promotion of standard precepts about children's understanding and children's needs drawn almost entirely from child development research in the global North, especially from the USA.

However, even if there is a misguided attempt to apply ideas about early childhood from the global North to the global South without due consideration of circumstances, nevertheless there is also a crisis for women and children occurring in the global South – partly as a result of economic globalisation. There has been enormous internal and external migration, from rural areas to the cities, and from poor countries to rich ones. The result has been what Pearce (1978) called 'the feminization of poverty'. There are now many millions more women coping on their own, mainly in jobs in the informal sector, as market traders or as servants, or in the 'hospitality trade' in the shanty towns or favelas of big urban cities. As a result, almost every big city in the global South now has extensive numbers of private for profit nurseries or

crèches, but these are largely unregistered and unrecorded (Woodhead et al., 2009; Penn, 2013). There is a good deal of rhetoric, much of it from external donors such as the World Bank, about the need for early childhood interventions (Garcia et al., 2008), but the reality is that most provision in the South is provided by private entrepreneurs. People pay for what they can afford, and poor people who cannot afford to pay fees either receive a very poor service or none at all. Jody Heymann (2002), for example, undertook a large survey of the needs of working mothers across a number of countries in the South, and pointed out that up to 30 per cent of working mothers leave their children in the care of siblings, or unattended, with the result that the accident rates for such children are shockingly high.

So, on the one hand, there is pressure to provide early childhood education and care (ECEC) and, on the other, there are local traditions and contexts which suggest that models from the North may be inappropriate. The debate about the need for ECEC generally draws on evidence from the North and ignores the circumstances of most children and the arrangements that are made for them. Yet the view of what constitutes good practice in the North is regarded as being a sound principle for export everywhere in the world. Steiner-Khamsi (2004) argues that educational ideas are never straightforwardly transferred from one country to another, but there is always a mixture of adaptation, incorporation and resistance, according to local contexts. These local contexts are not 'untouched' relics of a traditional past, but are themselves the product of many past influences and current socio-demographic pressures. She uses the example of education in Mongolia to describe how educational reforms prescribed by the World Bank and other international agencies were nominally accepted because of the much needed money being offered, but the reforms were in fact subverted or not implemented. For example, she describes attempts by donors to introduce 'community participation' into schools, but there is no word in Mongolian for 'community'. The nearest translation was 'home-place' which rendered the planned interventions by donors meaningless. The reforms just petered out. Although donors are willing to export ideas, the process is rarely reciprocal, and local ideas are regarded as quaint rather than warranting serious attention.

My own experience is that many of the pre-school interventions sponsored by donors in ex-Soviet countries or countries within the orbit of the Soviet system like Mongolia were subverted because the Soviet system of kindergartens was so very much more comprehensive than anything that was offered in its place. Parents and staff were justifiably resentful of the reforms (parent and toddler groups, part-time provision, etc.) that were being introduced (Penn, 2005). More recently, I describe attempts by the World Bank to introduce early childhood initiatives in Namibia, which bordered on farce because the donors were unable (or unwilling) to comprehend the extent of inequality and poverty in the country, and assumed that a combination of private entrepreneurs and community action would provide a viable Euro-American style early childhood service (Penn, 2008).

For the most part globally imported initiatives and reforms do not work, or do not work in the way that donors anticipate, and the usual response is to blame the recipients. They 'lack capacity' or they are deemed too lazy or dishonest to undertake the work that is necessary. A detailed analysis of policy discourse, policy implementation or actual practice is rarely undertaken to explain the frequent lack of success or lack of sustainability of initiatives. As Popkewitz argues, a detailed examination of global knowledge transfer in education would incorporate a critical view of what knowledge exists on the topic (for example, is it as scientific and empirically based as its adherents claim?) and 'how patterns of thought move through and are transmuted in different layers of the local and global systems' (Popkewitz, 2004: ix). From an early childhood perspective this would involve asking critical questions about practice; for instance, in the example cited from South Africa, how do ideas about child-centred practice sit alongside ideas about learning self-restraint and respect? Or as Jones and Vilar argue in relation to their work in Peru for the *Young Lives* project:

It is critical to unpack culturally specific understandings of core cultural concepts with which a research project is engaging (such as 'children' 'family' and 'work') and how these are subject to competing interpretations and reinterpretations in societies undergoing rapid social, political, economic and demographic transitions. (2008: 45)

All governments in the North have a national framework for the development and support of ECEC. The emphasis, the financing and the effectiveness with which ECEC is delivered vary considerably, even among rich nations but the commitment is unmistakable, and much of it has to do with providing childcare for working mothers (NESSE, 2012). In the global South the issue of working women has now also become critical. But most of the aid efforts focus on the need for nutrition or parental education (Anglo-American style) for poor communities (Penn, 2013). The challenge is to recognise the range of childhood needs that globalisation has produced in the global South, without reproducing the formats of early childhood services in the global North.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the expectations and understandings about young children's lives and what they need and how they should be treated in different cultural contexts. Most of the academic and policy discussion that takes place in early childhood does so in a Euro-American context which is untypical of the situation of most children and does not recognise the range of variation which exists.

This lack of recognition of local context is important because when donors try to export ideas about early childhood (or education more generally) to countries in the

South, they often fail. The chapter also discusses some of the ideas about how knowledge transfer takes place, how ideas – in particular, ideas about early childhood – get transferred and who by, and how the recipients incorporate and transform the projects that are often foisted upon them.

The issue of early childhood in the South is also important because of the very rapid urbanisation that is taking place in most countries of the world. Just as there has been a minor revolution about women's roles in the North, which has prompted the development of ECEC as much as concerns about educational opportunity, so there is a rather different kind of revolution going on in the South. Life in the slums and poor quarters of big cities in the South is very problematic, and the kind of care and education offered to young children who live in potentially hostile environments is a matter of real anxiety for anyone concerned about childhood.

Questions and exercises

1. What do you think are the most important values in bringing up young children? Do you think they would be shared by everyone you know?
2. What difference do you think poverty makes to the way young children think of themselves?
3. Do you think policy makers and practitioners in the global North should know more about the lives of children in the global South? If so, what kinds of issues should they be aware of?
4. Do you think young children in the South know about the lives children lead in the UK? If they do know, what would they think about the standards of provision that we have?

Further reading

The UNESCO handbook on early childhood care and education gives an overview of early childhood throughout the world, with chapters from many contributors from the global North and the global South. It is downloadable from the UNESCO website.
