

Rethinking the “toxicity” debate: the vitality of contemporary childhood

Abstract: *Patrick Alexander argues that the current debate over the “toxicity” of childhood in contemporary Britain needs to be recontextualised if it is to provide helpful, positive discussion about the nature of childhood and education in the twenty-first century. He believes that “toxicity” suggests that we are dealing with a disease that needs to be cured: apparently, children are being poisoned by globalisation, new technology, and standardised testing, and we must seek the remedies to these ills. He argues that the framework of “toxicity” fails to appreciate the complexity of “childhood”; and also reinforces an image of the relationship between adults and children – or teachers and students – that is asymmetrical and alienating to the young people it presumes to help.*

How are students to actively engage in teaching and learning if they are obliged to begin from the premise that their culture – the building blocks from which their identities are created – is “toxic” and needs to be made healthy again? In September 2006 the signatories of an open letter – including Royal Institute director Baroness Professor Susan Greenfield and author Phillip Pullman – stated their grave concerns about the future of

**Patrick
Alexander**

Patrick Alexander is a PhD student at the Oxford University Department of Educational Studies (OUDES). He is Junior Dean of St. Hugh's College.

childhood and education in twenty-first century Britain. They argued that the rise of consumer capitalism and the increased importance of new digital technologies were eroding the cognitive and creative capabilities of young people. The letter expressed concern that children are spending more time in front of computer screens developing “virtual” social relationships, instead of engaging in physical activity and “face-to-face” communication; increasingly using consumer products as markers of who they are and where they belong; eating unhealthy foods; under great pressure from marketing and advertising; whilst their education is dominated by an “audit culture” of exams and testing that drains the educational experience of imagination and creativity instead of supporting relational, socio-culturally inscribed approaches to teaching and learning.

All these factors, they argued, are likely to significantly diminish the cognitive abilities of contemporary British children, giving rise to an ever-increasing number of learning difficulties and an education system that does not serve the best interests of teachers or students.

These are undoubtedly important issues that deserve attention. However, it is equally important that the specific ingredients of this so-called “toxicity” are unravelled and understood. We need to recognise complexity rather than adopt a simplistic, negative perspective that measures the corruption of contemporary childhood against an essentially nostalgic vision of what “childhood” used to be. The first step towards doing this is to step outside of the perjorative conceptual frame of “toxicity” in order to debate the effects of contemporary society on childhood and education in a more nuanced and balanced manner.

The “toxicity” of childhood: a healthy starting point for debate?

In a recent article in the NUT’s *The Teacher* magazine, Richard House, senior lecturer in the Research Centre for Therapeutic Education at Roehampton University, and a principal signatory of the aforementioned open letter, argued that its purpose was not to create a moral panic but rather to encourage open, balanced debate into the factors influencing the “toxic” nature of contemporary British childhood. To do so, however, it would first seem useful to dispense altogether with the “toxic” metaphor currently being used. From the outset the epidemiological metaphor of “toxicity” implies that we are dealing with a disease that needs to be cured: children are being poisoned, and we must seek the remedy. This approach is unhelpful because it implies that children adopt an essentially passive role in their participation in contemporary culture rather than using the cultural artefacts around them to actively negotiate meaningful interactions between them and the cultural world of which they are a part.

If we remove the negative lens of “toxicity” it is possible to explore

more effectively the ways in which children actively shape their childhoods – to think about how they have developed new competencies to deal with the new cultural influences that play a part in defining childhood today. Beginning with the vitality of contemporary childhood in this way, it is easier to see both the negative, and more importantly, the positive potentials of living in a technologically advanced, consumerist society.

Contemporary childhood in perspective

It is easy to agree that contemporary children are exposed to a large number of “negative” cultural influences. Sadly, the world is not a perfect place. Intensive advertising that negatively influences the health choices of young people is damaging. The internet exposes children to potential abuse and mistreatment. There is no doubt that a diet of nothing but junk food and television is bad for you, whether you are 14 or 40. It is vital that we recognise the potential risks and dangers that face young people, not least within the education system that is supposed to provide them with the best that can be offered for their futures.

It is equally important that children themselves are aware of these issues and play an active role in determining how they want to experience and influence the world in which they live. However, it would be too easy to paint a black and white portrait of how these different aspects of contemporary society affect how young people develop. Consumption, advertising, television, and the internet all have the potential to impact negatively on the quality of life for children, but they are also inextricably tied to the processes by which we construct our identities today, both as “children” and as “adults”. The significance and nature of these influences – or what constitutes the “worst excesses” of this culture, to use Richard House’s phrase – is of course a matter of perspective (2006:15). House, for example, argues that children “need to spend less time in virtual worlds and more time in the real world – eating real food, playing real games, and interacting with real people, including the significant adults in their lives” (ibid. 14).

For children who have grown up with “virtual” relationships as part of their normal social repertoires, and indeed for the latest batch of NQTs who developed these skills as teenagers, the distinction between “real” (better) and “virtual” (worse) may not be quite as clean cut. For many young people social interactions on user-led online networks like myspace are just as “real” as interactions in the “real” world. Online worlds like *Second Life* and *Warcraft* are similarly “real”, not least because these virtual environments make it possible to transfer social and economic prestige from the “virtual” to the real world. Virtual tools and designer clothes are bought and sold daily on ebay (itself, of course, a “virtual” marketplace)

for use in social worlds.

Mobile phone technology further imbeds the “virtual” in the “real”: text conversations take place within and alongside face-to-face communications. Suggesting that the “virtual” aspects of children’s lives are any less important or vital than their activities in the “real” world not only misrepresents the cultural importance of the latter, but also oversimplifies the complex relationship that exists between “virtual” and “real” social experiences. It is not surprising that such misreadings should take place, given that globalization and the current rise of new digital technologies are issues that most teachers and child development professionals have had to deal with in their adult lives. For today’s children, however, there is nothing unfamiliar or inherently negative about identities shaped in part by consumption and digital technology; these are normal aspects of cultural life in the twenty-first century. In this sense it is to young people that we should turn first to find out what really constitutes the “worst excesses” of the globalising culture that they are shaping, and which shapes them (and us). After all, for the most part they know better.

New influences, new risks, new competencies (for children and adults)

Alan Prout begins to explore the ways in which oppositional constructions of childhood and adulthood fit uncomfortably with the complex realities to which they are applied today. The same arguments can be used to problematise the idea that contemporary childhood should be seen simply as either “toxic” or “healthy”. James and Prout (1997) suggest that the homogenising force of globalisation has led to “the assumption of some kind of universal experience of childhood” (1997:4). That is, Western notions of childhood are increasingly used as an international standard by which all children should be measured, often with little regard for the cultural specificities involved in the construction of childhood in non-Western societies.

At the same time, however, Prout argues that the spread of global consumer capitalism has allowed for an increased diversity in notions of childhood identity, in that an increased flow of goods, images, and ideas has led to myriad reinterpretations of these cultural products in different cultural settings (Prout, 2005:30). Nike shoes do not mean the same thing in Manchester and Mogadishu. Moreover, developments in digital and electronic media have vastly expanded the scope of cultural artefacts upon which young people are able to draw to construct their identities. Buckingham suggests that “it is impossible to understand contemporary childhood without taking account of the media. Indeed, it could be argued that children today are living ‘media childhoods’ – that children’s

experiences, and indeed the *meanings* of childhood itself, are largely defined and determined by electronic media...media use is inextricably tied up with the process of identity formation" (2003:184 &187). Moreover, the scope of the media and the forms that media texts take is rapidly changing, with the boundaries between media and consumer products blurring as marketing strategies spread the profits of one into the other (ibid. 198). And just as the line between product and media begins to blur, so too do the lines between the different audiences that these media attempt to reach. Increased access to the internet, television and other media has

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allowed children and adolescents to access "adult" domains which would otherwise be far more difficult to enter. With this expanded repertoire of cultural knowledge children and adolescents are able to subvert the supposed divide between adults and themselves, blurring the boundaries of identity on both sides. Conversely, in order to accommodate for this increased cultural repertoire, products and entertainment programming supposedly geared at young people is accessible to adult audiences as well. It is fitting, with this in mind, that House refers to contemporary children as "mini adults" (2006: 14); contemporary adults are "big kids" in the same way.

There are a number of other areas in which processes of globalisation have altered experiences of childhood in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Prout makes the point that late modernity is characterised by fragmentation: "economically driven change is paralleled by multi-dimensional social and cultural changes affecting a wide range of relationships: class, gender, ethnicity, identity, ecological and risk awareness, and practices of civil society and politics" (2005:24). It would of course be misleading to assume that "modernity" was, in contrast, a stable and sedentary social and economic environment in which binary relationships of rich and poor, male and female, or child and adult existed unproblematically.

The scale of fragmentation wrought by the rise of global consumer capitalism and its concurrent social and cultural impacts does, however, make the idea of discrete, unchanging binary oppositions difficult to sustain. In the lives of children this is evidenced on multiple layers. Transnational movements of people and products raise questions of identity that may not have figured in constructions of child or adolescent selves in the past.

Race, ethnicity and national identity are increasingly problematic

cultural markers with which to construct identities, not least in the wake of the supposed failure of British multiculturalism and the post 9/11 turn against diversity that this has been seen to herald. Family configurations have become more complex, with more frequent and increasingly socially acceptable incidences of lone parent families. Children negotiate multiple relationships within these family matrices, and as a result are capable of dealing with a diversity of social situations that would not present themselves, for better or worse, in a traditional family setting.

An interesting example of how global economic practices have changed markers of identity for young people can be seen in Yunxiang Yan's account of how increased disposable income for youths in semi-rural China led to

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massive changes in bridewealth practices and kinship structures, eroding father-son relationships in favour of conjugal ties (2003). Wives are now more important than fathers. Whether or not these kinds of changes

to social life should be seen as negative, or "toxic", is to an extent irrelevant (or at least very subjective); they are happening, and children are developing complex sets of tools to deal with these changes in positive ways.

Contemporary adulthood

The effects of late modernity are, of course, felt by adults as well. Nick Lee suggests that, "With regard to being a 'grown up', we have entered an age of uncertainty, an age in which adult life is newly unpredictable and in which whatever stabilities we manage to produce cannot be expected to last our whole lives" (Lee, 2001:7). Lee points principally to shifts in the stability of both employment and intimate relations for adults when characterising the current "age of uncertainty".

Prout suggests the same: "It is no longer expected that adults will necessarily enter into one lifelong marriage or pursue a career until retirement. We live in the era of 'reconstituted families'. These have made the 'unfinished' character of adult lives as visible as those of children" (Prout, 2005:66). The possibility for rapid, disruptive change has eroded the notion of adulthood as a stable, completed identity, and as a result the "end result" of childhood is removed; there is no perfectly formed adult in the adolescent cocoon. This, of course, does not indicate that adulthood is becoming more "toxic"; it simply suggests that constructions of "adulthood" are developing to accommodate new social and cultural conditions.

In terms of teaching and learning these developments present difficult new challenges and real opportunities for positive, disruptive change. As Lee goes on to suggest, the notion of the "unfinished" adult has significant

implications for the authority of adults in Western complex contemporary societies. As they are no longer willing or able to uphold the traditional distinctions between parents and children that their parents maintained, contemporary adults are unable to present themselves as the unquestionable, expert superiors of their children. While parents remain more knowledgeable and experienced than their children, hierarchical family structures of authority and control are in some ways developing into more democratic systems where negotiation and participation are key (Lee, 2001:19).

The cast-iron patriarchal hierarchies of traditional Chinese family structures are no exception. Yan describes how the ideology of filial piety has been eroded by shifts in the financial wealth of young people and the new cultural markers – those of consumer capitalism – that they now claim above family as symbols of living happily (2003:162). Semi-rural China may seem a long way from the teachers and students of British secondary schools, but it is arguable that understanding of contemporary adulthood and childhood in either setting requires a set of conceptual tools that moves beyond a discrete binary oppositions of “adult” vs. “child” or “toxic” vs. “healthy”.

The same can be argued for the supposed dichotomy of teachers and students. In the “age of uncertainty”, how should “unfinished” adult teachers negotiate their relationships with “unfinished” students? Could teaching and learning benefit from rethinking how “adults” and “young people” interact in contemporary complex societies like the UK? Finally, in

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practice, do adult teachers and adolescent students recognise and/or embrace the notion of a common “cultural world” in the classroom, or are they more at ease keeping one another’s identities at arm’s length?

House argues quite rightly that “authentic ‘relational learning’” is essential if children are to learn in a productive, creative way (2006:14). The “audit culture” of standardised testing, he argues, runs contrary to the aim of creating a positive context for learning. Summative assessment, used inappropriately as it currently is in the English education system, certainly presents a hurdle to positive classroom interactions in which knowledge is shared and developed by both teachers and students. However, it would seem equally difficult to develop genuine, positive learning relationships if the conceptual framework of “toxicity” is maintained. We should begin instead, perhaps, by looking at the vitality of childhood, celebrating and harnessing the ability of young people to shape

the very different world in which contemporary childhoods continue to develop.

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