

Understanding Contemporary Childhoods and Studenthoods in the Asia-Pacific Region

Introduction

The rise of Asia has made headline news both globally and locally in the 21st century. In particular, the growth of Asian economies and the competitiveness of Asian students' academic performances in international assessment tests such as the Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) are frequently mentioned. For example, in the PISA 2009 assessment results, Asian participants such as Korea; Hong Kong, China; Shanghai, China; Singapore; Japan; and, Taiwan have been placed in the top performing countries or economies with very high scores (OECD, 2011). The dominance of Asian students' high academic performances in such high stakes tests has not only made international education headline news but also opened up new debates concerning the "effectiveness" of Asian schooling systems and Asian pedagogical practices. Many "Western" countries have indicated that they want to emulate the trend of Asian students' superior academic performances. For examples, mass media reports with titles such as "How China is Winning the School Race" (Sharma, 2011) and "Top Test Scores from Shanghai Stun Educators" (Dillon, 2010), as well as heated debates following Amy Chua's (2011) controversial publication of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, have all come together to highlight the perceived success in the context of Asian cultural practices and contemporary schooling systems as "models" that promise excellence in learning outcomes.

At the end of 2012 the Australian Government released a white paper entitled *Australia in the Asian Century*. This document provides a roadmap for Australia with a strategic plan to engage with Asia in a number of sectors including education. As stated in the document:

During the Asian century, the importance of education to Australia's economic performance will continue to grow. We can only remain a world-beating economy if we also deliver world-class education (Australian Government, 2012, p. 164).

This white paper highlights the phenomenon of the Western romanticization of Asian students' academic performance as being the ultimate objective of learning outcomes.

While Western systems look at Asian schools and students' academic performances as being systems with "better" learning outcomes, most Asian countries continue to look at the Western education systems as "advanced" progressive models which need to be emulated, especially in terms of students' abilities to be creative, innovative and imaginative. Education policy "borrowing" from the West to the East seems to be somewhat typical for many Asian countries (Lee and Tseng, 2008; Park, Lee, & Jun, 2013). Although the divide between Eastern and Western cultures is evident, it is important go beyond a binary and simple logic of Western/non-Western binary constructions of childhoods and appropriate/inappropriate pedagogical practices to reconceptualize the notion of childhoods and studenthoods in selected Asian cultural contexts.

Conceptual Framework: Theories and Methods

The Global Childhoods Project emerged from a set of shared interests and concerns about the ways in which childhood is constructed, configured and experienced at the intersection of global forces and local contexts. Additionally, we were interested in how childhoods were currently researched in the Asia Pacific

region. Despite a diversity of disciplinary backgrounds and theoretical orientations, collaborators on the project (from Hong Kong, Malaysia, Thailand, Taiwan, Korea and Japan) maintain a shared interest in education as a key site in which *childhood* is at once an object of policy formation, a benchmark of national progress, and an expression of cultural imaginaries (Saltmarsh, 2011). This renders education as a focal point for exploring global childhoods in an era in which dominant narratives of globalization, concerned as they are with what Sassen refers to as “upper circuits of capital” and in particular, the “hypermobility of capital” (Sassen, 2008, p. 289), are juxtaposed against issues of a pragmatic and relational, as well as disciplinary and theoretical, nature encountered in everyday research practice. Thus for Sassen, and us, critical to understanding the dynamics of globalization “are questions of place and scale because the global is generally conceptualized as overriding or neutralizing place and as operating at a self-evident global scale” (Sassen, 2008, p. 287).

Stronach (2010) maintains that globalizing discourses bring about a need to relocate both education and research practice. This, in turn, indicates “a need to revolutionize qualitative inquiry, particularly in addressing a more performative rather than representational ideal” (Stronach, 2010, p. 1). To that end, we set out a framework for conducting a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995, 1998) that would enable us to move beyond macro-narratives of global capitalism and its effects in various regions. Our interest is to explore the nuanced ways in which childhood is experienced at the intersection of education and culture with the range of global flows – of people, capital, technology, media and ideologies – described by Appadurai (1996). Yet, as Ong highlights, “an approach that views political economy as separate from human agency cannot be corrected by a theory of practice that views political-economic forces as external to everyday meanings and action” (Ong, 1999, p. 5). Hence, we must take into account the “reciprocal construction” between global processes and everyday practices.

Wanting to explore multiple layers of the meanings of schooling and the effects of education for children across different cultural settings, as well as to probe the nuances of meanings and practices shaped by, and in turn shaping, global processes. In our project, we are critical of a Western-centric gaze that conscripts local specificities into the service of epistemological rationalities that may bear little relation to the contexts and lifeworlds of participants. As Chong asserts that this is a key problematic within Southeast Asian studies that have “adopted Western-centric theories to illuminate local phenomena [and] has yielded studies and analyses that are prized for their compatibility and comparability to Western experiences” (Chong, 2007, p. 213). According to Chong, “this has come at the expense of local narratives and voices that may not be neatly located in the accepted spectrum of cultural identities” (Chong, 2007, p. 213).

Seeking to reconceptualize contemporary childhoods and how these constructions of childhoods are interjecting and creating spaces for new identities of studenthoods, we move towards a non-positivist, post-qualitative analytical approach to find alternative epistemological and ontological home for different ways of understanding. Additionally, collaborations that involve international groups are one way of addressing concerns “that there is a western bias in topics, methodologies and data gathering methods” (Shordike, et al., 2010, p. 337).

Contemporary Lives: Being a child in Hong Kong?

Contemporary living and learning in Hong Kong has had varying impacts on children. The Hong Kong government has adopted and implemented a “biliterate and trilingual”

policy since 1997. This policy stresses the importance of being biliterate in traditional *written* Chinese and (British) English, as well as being fluent in Cantonese, Putonghua (also known as Mandarin Chinese) and *spoken* English. Such a multi-language policy inevitably has major implications for children's learning and living experiences, from a very young age. For example, whether to use English or Cantonese as the medium of instruction in classrooms and schools has become a critical educational issue across all education levels. At first glance, while this multi-language policy appears to pay equal attention to the three languages, with its colonial history, Hong Kong society has come to construct English as the language associated with higher economic, social, and cultural status. Moreover, while the idea of becoming polyglot is desirable, the unequal political, social, educational, and cultural constructions of the three languages in Hong Kong have created noticeable paradoxical conditions in everyday life as well as in teaching and learning contexts.

Currently, all non-profit-making kindergartens offer English and Putonghua lessons to children, in addition to maintaining Cantonese as the daily form of communication language in classrooms. This biliterate and trilingual policy has been creating layers of complexity in children's learning and living experiences (for example, see Poon, 2004). According to official statistics from the Bureau of Education, about 99.5% of five-year-old children are in kindergartens. Hong Kong children between 3-5 years of age most commonly attend half-day kindergarten programs, particularly since the implementation of the pre-primary voucher scheme in 2006, which provided financial assistance to families so that their child could attend kindergarten. Currently, all kindergartens in Hong Kong are privately operated and they are categorized as either non-profit-making kindergartens or private independent kindergartens, depending on their source of funding or sponsoring organizations. Typically, non-profit-making kindergartens are funded by voluntary agencies while private independent kindergartens are organized by private enterprises. Kindergarten in Hong Kong is thought of as 'pre-primary' sector, which implies sociocultural notions preparing for primary schooling and education. Thus, attending kindergarten could possibly imply picking up of an identity of a student. For example, a young three-year-old child would go to kindergarten by a school mini-bus, wear school uniform, have a school identity card in his/her school bag.

Some Concluding Notes

In this presentation, we would locate our study in the context of a larger collaborative partnership which aims to interrogate Asian Childhoods in a global context. We aim to illustrate our initial (re)conceptualization of the ways in which young children in selected Asia-Pacific locations are educated and cared for. Our work uncovers how policy imperatives are enacted in practice and the (im)possibilities of this reality in the context of the lives of young children.

Contemporary childhoods often imply constructions of studenthoods and cannot be generalized into a singular image of childhood. The varying images of the *children as students* across different learning contexts (i.e., homes, schools, afterschool programs) elucidate the multiplicities of childhoods studenthoods, learning, and living experiences. Our presentation offers a unique opportunity to shift towards critical reconceptualization of what contemporary Asian childhoods as well as studenthoods might look like. Our intention is not to provide a summary of what Asian childhoods are, as a new grand narrative. Rather, our joint efforts in understanding children's living experiences are to re-narrate, de-colonize, and de-imperialize the notion of childhoods and studenthood. It is through such critical

reconceptualization will we be able to create new ways of understanding our work with children, as well as opening windows to understand children's lifeworlds.

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