

the postmodern turn in childhood studies and its pedagogical implications

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abstract

This paper reflects on the postmodern shift in childhood studies and its impact on education. As scholars interrogate the modern notion of childhood, the discourse of postmodernism has entered the realm of childhood studies, yielding various new perspectives on childhood. The key characteristics of the postmodern shift in childhood studies include: 1) the rejection of essentialism regarding childhood and the recognition of the diversity inherent in it; 2) the deconstruction of binary oppositions and the advocacy for the heterogeneous nature of childhood and the concept of "becoming-child"; 3) the dissolution of the modern subject associated with childhood and the reconstruction of the postmodern subject. Postmodern childhood studies will bring some positive impacts to the field of education, such as focusing on the differences among children rather than abstracting them into a unified map, removing adultism from education, and emphasizing the construction of new forms of child subjectivity in education. However, at the same time, it will also bring many challenges to education, such as questioning the essence of childhood and good education, shaking the foundation of educational existence brought by the dissolution of childhood, and the loss of educational significance due to the fluid and changing construction of child subjectivity. This underscores the importance of acknowledging that as education embraces the discourse of postmodern childhood, both its promises and perils will permeate the educational domain.

keywords: childhood studies, postmodernism, the nature of childhood, binary opposition, subjectivity

el giro posmoderno en los estudios de la infancia y sus implicancias pedagógicas

resumen

Este artículo reflexiona sobre el cambio posmoderno en los estudios de la infancia y su impacto en la educación. A medida que investigadores e investigadoras cuestionan la noción moderna de infancia, el discurso posmoderno ha entrado en el ámbito de los estudios de la infancia, dando lugar a diversas perspectivas nuevas sobre ella. Las principales características del giro posmoderno en los estudios de la infancia incluyen: 1) el rechazo del esencialismo con respecto a la infancia y el reconocimiento de la diversidad inherente a la misma; 2) la deconstrucción de oposiciones binarias y la defensa de la naturaleza heterogénea de la infancia y del concepto de «devenir-niño»; 3) la disolución del sujeto moderno asociado a la infancia y la reconstrucción del sujeto posmoderno. Los estudios posmodernos de la infancia traerán impactos positivos al campo de la educación, como centrarse en las diferencias entre los niños en lugar de abstraerlas en un mapa unificado, eliminar el adultismo de la educación y poner énfasis en la construcción de nuevas formas de subjetividad infantil en la educación. Sin embargo, al mismo tiempo, también traerá consigo muchos escollos para la educación, como el cuestionamiento de la esencia de la infancia y de la buena educación, la sacudida de los cimientos de la existencia educativa provocada por la disolución de la infancia y la pérdida de significado

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educativo debido a la construcción fluida y cambiante de la subjetividad infantil. Esto destaca la importancia de reconocer que, a medida que la educación adopte el discurso de la infancia posmoderna, tanto sus promesas como sus peligros penetrarán en el ámbito educativo.

palabras-clave: estudios de la infancia, postmodernismo, naturaleza de la infancia, oposición binaria, subjetividad

a mudança pós-moderna nos estudos da infância e suas implicações pedagógicas

resumo

Este artigo reflete sobre a mudança pós-moderna nos estudos da infância e o seu impacto na educação. À medida que os estudiosos questionam a noção moderna de infância, o discurso do pós-modernismo tem entrado no domínio dos estudos da infância, dando origem a várias novas perspectivas. As principais características da mudança pós-moderna nos estudos da infância incluem: 1) a rejeição do essencialismo em relação à infância e o reconhecimento da diversidade inerente a ela; 2) a desconstrução de oposições binárias e a defesa da natureza heterogênea da infância e do conceito de “devir-criança”; 3) a dissolução do sujeito moderno associado à infância e à reconstrução do sujeito pós-moderno. Os estudos pós-modernos da infância trarão alguns impactos positivos para o campo da educação, como focar nas diferenças entre as crianças em vez de condensá-las num mapa unificado, além de remover o adultismo da educação e enfatizar a construção de novas formas de subjetividade infantil na educação. Contudo, isso também trará muitos desafios à educação, como o questionamento da essência da infância e da boa educação, o abalo dos alicerces da existência educativa devido à dissolução da infância, e a perda de significado educativo devido à construção fluida e mutável da subjetividade infantil. Isso destaca a importância de reconhecer que, à medida que a educação abraça o discurso da infância pós-moderna, tanto as suas promessas como os seus perigos irão permear o domínio educativo.

palavras-chave: estudos da infância; pós-modernismo; natureza da infância; oposição binária; subjetividade.



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introduction

Since the 1960s, postmodernism has stimulated criticism of modern discourse in various disciplines, including childhood studies. Scholars in this field have attempted to break away from modern conceptions of childhood and formulate new theories. And postmodern thought has emerged as a crucial ideological influence in childhood studies, playing a pivotal role in its development. Postmodern research has yielded numerous fresh insights into childhood, promoting significant shifts in perspectives on children and education. How does postmodernism impact childhood studies? What new understandings of childhood does it provide? How should we evaluate the contributions and challenges posed by the postmodern paradigm shift in childhood studies in the realm of education? These are among the questions this article endeavors to address.

In modern society, rationality holds a prominent position, serving as the primary tool for individuals to attain enlightenment or liberation and to discern the universal order of the world. Consequently, the cultivation of rational individuals has become a central goal, with universality, consensus, and essence emerging as primary subjects of rational inquiry. The modern conception of childhood has inherited this fundamental spirit of modernity, giving rise to three themes: “rationality,” “naturalness,” and “universality” (James & Prout, 1997, p. 10). Within the modern conception of childhood, there exists several common basic assumptions. These include the belief that childhood goes through a natural process of development, that all children follow universal laws of development, and that the rational stage of adulthood represents the ultimate goal of childhood. Influenced by these basic assumptions, childhood is predominantly perceived from a biological standpoint and is construed as a natural state of being. Furthermore, childhood is often regarded as a deficient stage compared to adulthood, and the understanding of childhood is primarily derived through comparison with adulthood.

With the increasing criticism of modernity, many scholars have begun to question the modern conception of childhood. Is childhood primarily a natural phenomenon? Does childhood follow general laws of development, or does it have a more complex understanding? Is childhood significant as a preparatory stage for adulthood? In the 1980s, the field of childhood studies forged a new paradigm for examining children beyond the predominant framework of developmental psychology (Wall, 2019, p. 2). Many new concepts about childhood emerged from childhood studies, including viewing children as socially constructed actors, regarding children as “being” rather than “becoming,” and understanding childhood as not inherently natural and universal, but rather as multifaceted. By analyzing these concepts, we can see that they were constructed within the framework of postmodernism as the principal ideological foundation, enabling the shift from modern to postmodern understandings of childhood. As Kennedy states:

This critique of evolutionary, developmentalist theory and practice as an expression of colonizing biopower, of subjectification as a form of subjection by a rationalistic, instrumentalist form of reason, may be seen as the beginning, or the dark place, the negative space from which the postmodern discourses of childhood that I want to trace emerges (Kennedy, 2013, p. 146).

The aim of the postmodern turn in childhood studies is to critique and reflect upon the modern understandings of childhood, with the intention of reinterpreting the nature and value of childhood, as well as reassessing the relationship between childhood and adulthood.

The typical characteristics of the postmodern turn in childhood studies encompass the criticism and displacement of core concepts, such as subjectivity, nature, binary oppositions, essentialism, and metanarratives with notions like difference, heterogeneity, complexity, rhizome, and “becoming-”. Childhood studies embrace the fundamental ethos of postmodernism, thus shaping a postmodern understanding of childhood. By integrating these postmodern perspectives, we find that the postmodern turn in childhood studies mainly embodies three typical characteristics: 1) the rejection of essentialism regarding childhood and the recognition of the diversity inherent in childhood; 2) the deconstruction of binary oppositions and the advocacy for the heterogeneous



nature of childhood and the concept of “becoming-child”; 3) the dissolution of the modern subject associated with childhood and the reconstruction of the postmodern subject. These characteristics are elaborated upon in detail below.

“anti-essentialism” and the ontology of difference of childhood

Postmodern discourses of childhood are centered on objecting to the concept of the “nature of childhood” and advocating for the social construction and differences within childhood, a perspective closely aligned with postmodernist thought. Some researchers view “anti-essentialism” as a cornerstone of postmodern theory (Feng, 2003, p. 43), signifying a repudiation of “essentialism” that aligns with the sentiments of numerous postmodernists. Postmodernists argue that traditional metaphysics’ major flaw lies in its pursuit of “essence,” “foundation,” “consensus,” “unity,” and “universality” – the search for commonalities, universal laws, or shared attributes among things. Critiques of “essentialism” primarily stem from postmodernists’ concerns about the suppression of diversity by unity, of individuality by generality, and of differences by consensus. Consequently, they eschew the exploration of shared characteristics in favor of examining the innate distinctions between things.

For instance Nietzsche, a progenitor of postmodern thought, introduced “perspectivism” to counter essentialism, asserting that “essence” is non-existent; instead, there exist only varied perspectives, with equilibrium achieved through the neglect of differing or unequal elements within them. Gilles Deleuze’s concept of rhizomes, characterized by difference and becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 8), Jacques Derrida’s critique of logocentrism (Derrida, 1997, p. 12), and Jean-Francois Lyotard’s skepticism towards metanarratives (Lyotard, 1984, p. 34) all underscore this criticism of essentialism. They vehemently oppose “essentialism,” aspiring to construct intellectual frameworks in realms rich with diversity rather than unity. As Wang (2000, p. 4) succinctly stated,

In the so-called essentialism, what persists is chance, opportunity, luck, and inexplicable grotesqueness. The essence is not inevitable, it is not self-evident, it is merely the imagination and illusion of newcomers, it is the accumulation and confusion of ulterior motives.

Under the influence of postmodernist anti-essentialism, childhood essentialism has been subject to intense criticism. The idea that childhood exists only in a plural form has increasingly become a prevailing discourse in childhood studies. In the field of developmental psychology, there exists a quest to unravel its essence, entailing the search for overarching principles governing children's development. However, under the influence of postmodernism, childhood studies have interrogated this perspective, posing numerous inquiries: Should all children conform to these universal developmental laws? Is childhood merely a natural occurrence? How does historical context and social culture shape childhood?

Philippe Ariès' seminal work, "Centuries of Childhood," serves as a catalyst for such questioning. He observes that differing historical epochs harbor distinct conceptualizations of childhood, noting that certain contemporary perceptions of childhood were nonexistent in the past (Ariès, 1962, p. 128). Ariès dismantles the illusion of a universally applicable developmental law for children, urging exploration into the diverse historical understandings of childhood. Following Ariès, Neil Postman further challenges childhood essentialism, particularly through the lens of media, asserting that "childhood is a social artifact, not a biological necessity" (Postman, 1982, p. 143). He contends that the concept of childhood is constructed within specific social and cultural milieus, thereby suggesting that any understanding of childhood's nature is inherently bound to social and cultural construction rather than representing a genuine comprehension of childhood. In essence, genuine comprehension of childhood is elusive; instead, what prevails is an understanding of childhood within the confines of particular social and cultural contexts.

The new sociology of childhood also takes a critical attitude towards the essence of childhood. It rejects the notion of childhood as universally applicable; instead, it views childhood as a social construct shaped by society. "Childhood has to be recognized and understood through routine and emergent collective perceptions that are grounded in changing politics, philosophy, economics, social policy or whatever" (James et al., 1998, p. 196). As a result, the central inquiry regarding childhood transitions from "what is the universal law governing



childhood development?” to “how is childhood shaped by societal influences? and what variations does childhood encompass across different social, cultural, racial, gender, and class contexts?” Childhood is no longer conceived as a monolithic concept. Rather, the advocacy lies in recognizing its plurality. Embracing childhood’s pluralistic nature entails acknowledging the intricate and diverse realities encompassed within this framework.

Under the influence of postmodernism, concerns about essentialism have permeated the realm of childhood studies. Perspectives portraying childhood as fixed, idealized, and homogenous have been labeled as essentialist and scrutinized by researchers in childhood studies. Conversely, anti-essentialism, diversity, and pluralism, advocated by postmodernism, have emerged as central tenets among childhood scholars. In this discipline, diversity serves as the foundation of childhood’s existence. Thus, the exploration of varied and pluralistic childhood experiences has become a focal point. This paradigm shift within childhood studies is intimately tied to the principles of postmodernism.

the deconstruction of binary oppositions and the advocacy for the heterogeneity of childhood and “becoming-child”

In the realm of childhood studies, under the influence of postmodernism, the deconstruction of binary oppositions has emerged as a significant focus. This includes the deconstruction of dichotomies such as nature-culture, childhood-adulthood, being-becoming, and structure-agency. Best and Kellner affirm this trend, stating:

He (Derrida) argued that the binary oppositions governing Western philosophy and culture (subject/object, appearance/reality, speech/writing, etc.) work to construct a far-from-innocent hierarchy of values which attempt not only to guarantee truth, but also serve to exclude and devalue allegedly inferior terms or positions (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 21).

Postmodernism adopts a similar critical stance towards binary oppositions and essentialism. Derrida endeavors to substitute the “center” with “différance” in order to reveal the concealed margins, thereby thwarting the rigidity and totalitarianism inherent in hierarchical value systems:

To do justice to this necessity is to recognize that in a classical

philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-a-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment (Derrida, 1981, p. 41).

Deleuze deconstructs binary opposition through the concept of “becoming.” “Becoming” entails a dynamic transformation among heterogeneous entities, devoid of any inclination towards teleology or finality. He dismantles the correlation between binary opposites like “point-point” and employs the analogy of a “line” to delineate the connection between heterogeneous entities, thus:

... establish connections between male and female, white and non-white, adult and child, human and non-human. These connections give rise to ‘becoming-women,’ ‘becoming-blacks,’ and ‘becoming-animals,’ thereby dismantling binary oppositions in social codes and enabling the emergence of novel forms of thought and interaction (Mai, 2013, p. 72).

These postmodern thinkers have profoundly influenced the challenge to binary oppositions in understanding childhood. For example, Allan Prout contends that while sociological theory embraced postmodern discourse, which involves decentering the subject and seeking metaphors of mobility, fluidity, and complexity, the sociology of childhood remained entrenched in modern discourse. This included an emphasis on children’s agency and the conception of childhood as a social structural form. As Prout puts it, “at the very time that sociological assumptions about modernity were being eroded they arrived, late, to childhood” (Prout, 2005, p. 62). The sociology of childhood has entrenched itself within, but not transcended, the oppositional dichotomies of modernist sociology, including those between nature and culture, childhood and adulthood, agency and structure, and being and becoming. Throughout the past century, childhood has predominantly been perceived through a biological lens, solidifying its status as a mainstream conception of natural existence.

In opposition to this biological perspective, the new sociology of childhood posits that childhood is a social construct and emphasizes children’s active social agency. Prout argues that this cultural perspective represents a stance diametrically opposed to that of nature and biology, thereby reinforcing the binary opposition between nature and culture and perpetuating modernist binary



thinking. Such binary oppositions, Prout suggests, are neither beneficial nor conducive to the advancement of childhood studies. Similar to Derrida's deconstruction, Prout endeavors to eschew the reduction of one term to the other or the establishment of a priori relations of dominance between them. Instead, he advocates for keeping these two opposites open and exploring alternative spaces obscured by binary oppositions. Prout contends that the pluralistic blending and complementarity of nature and culture constitute essential aspects of human existence; therefore, the demarcation between nature and culture must remain porous. As Prout asserts:

Childhood should be seen as neither "natural" nor "cultural" but a multiplicity of 'nature-cultures', that is a variety of complex hybrids constituted from heterogeneous materials and emergent through time. It is cultural, biological, social, individual, historical, technological, spatial, material, discursive ...and more (Prout, 2005, p. 144).

Additionally, the postmodern discourse of childhood studies attempted to deconstruct the binary opposition between childhood and adulthood. In accordance with the binary oppositional framework of modernity, children are constructed in direct contrast to adults, and the concept of childhood emerges in opposition to adulthood. For instance, adulthood embodies qualities of being public, cultural, rational, independent, active, competent, and associated with work, while childhood is characterized by its private, natural, irrational, dependent, passive, incompetent, and playful attributes. This essentially reflects the notion of "childhood as deficiency" – that is, childhood is perceived as deficient in comparison to adulthood, with the purpose of childhood being oriented towards eventual adulthood. Furthermore, various discussions concerning the relationship between childhood and adulthood have arisen, such as viewing adults and children as entirely distinct entities or considering childhood as the ultimate goal of adulthood. While some of these perspectives remain entrenched within the paradigm of binary opposition, Turner and Matthews highlight:

... in between the view that children are what adults are, know what adults know, and deserve exactly what adults deserve and the view that children are the negation or opposite of adults in being, knowledge, and desert, is an as yet unfathomable range of

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possibilities that merits exploration and mapping (Turner & Matthews, 1998, p. 6).

Postmodernism offers childhood researchers theoretical resources to explore new possibilities for adult-child relationships. As Kennedy (1992, p.44) asserts, "The first principle of a hermeneutical approach to childhood is a recognition of the mutual necessity of the terms 'adults' and 'child' ... any philosophy of childhood is also a philosophy of adulthood." Drawing from Deleuze's concept of "becoming-child," Kennedy endeavors to investigate a novel relationship between children and adults. According to Kennedy (2013, p.149), "Becoming-child is a line of flight, a trajectory of escape from the subject identified by the molar categories of class, gender, race, ethnicity, law, custom, and subjectivity itself as located in historical practices."

Walter Kohan also states, "'Becoming-child' is not a matter of age but of flux, of intensity. It is a revolutionary space of transformation. It is not that a given subject becomes a child, transforms himself into a child or lives a childlike life: rather, he occupies a space of transformation" (Kohan, 2011, p. 342). Thus, "becoming-child" signifies childhood's successful emancipation from dependence on adulthood for self-definition, eschewing the use of adulthood as the sole metric for measurement. Simultaneously, it avoids falling into binary oppositions wherein childhood serves as the benchmark for adulthood, or childhood and adulthood are perceived as distinct entities. "Becoming-child" delineates a concept of childhood not contingent upon age and fully dismantles the binary opposition between adulthood and childhood.

dispelling the modern subject with childhood and reconstructing the postmodern subject

The critique of modernity by postmodernism not only centers on essentialism and dualism but also on "subjectivity." Childhood researchers employ the concept of childhood to challenge modern subjectivity, reconstruct the postmodern subject, and consequently formulate a new comprehension of both subjectivity and childhood. In the framework of modern subjectivity, humans are positioned as the subject and focal point of the world, transforming the



relationship between humanity and the world into one between subject and object, or center and peripheral entities. Human rationality serves as the wellspring of all truths and values, constituting the cornerstone of modernity's self-assertion. Consequently, humanity has assumed the pivotal role in the advancement of modern society, with the pursuit of "everything for human freedom and happiness" emerging as the ultimate societal objective. Moreover, the principle of subjectivity has served as the legal underpinning for the development of politics, economy, law, culture, and other domains within modern society. Individuals have initiated reflections on the rationalized quandary of subjectivity. "It seems to me that the idea of subjectivity has been losing strength for some time, due both to concrete experiences of our age and to the probings of leading philosophers" (Dallmayr, 1981, p. 1).

Postmodernism fiercely criticizes the modern principle of subjectivity and advocates for the creation of a new form of subjectivity. Postmodernists have made significant efforts to transition from a fixed and singular rational subject to a fluid and changing one. For instance, Deleuze endeavored to introduce new concepts, such as nomadic subjects to reject a unified and stable modern subject. Deleuze's perspective represents a significant shift in postmodern subjectivity. "The subject is constantly changing at any time and is always in the process of complex, contradictory, and unfinished cross-change. It can only be an illusion to fully grasp and control these processes" (Franks, 1994, p. 13). Furthermore, the transition from the rational subject of modernity to a relational, and decentralized existence constitutes a new understanding of human beings put forth by postmodern thinkers. "The subject we are returning to now is not the subject of cognition and the subject of truth, but the subject of desire and instinctiveness, which is a subject that has relinquished its classical subjectivity" (Wang, 2000, p. 10). Although human beings are the subject of desire, this "desire" cannot be captured and contained; hence, human beings are the pluralistic subjects devoid of a fixed essence. Postmodernists view human beings as "self in relationship" and as beings who construct their existence, thereby dispelling the image of human beings as embodying "independence and self-reliance" in modern subjectivity.

To deconstruct modern subjectivity, some postmodernists have identified children as rational others. The characteristics of childhood, such as variability, dependence, and susceptibility to influence, serve as grounds for opposing the subject governed by reason, the fixed and singular rational subject, and the subject entirely independent of others. Consequently postmodern children, with their fluidity and interaction with others, have emerged as a significant force in challenging modern subjectivity. For instance, Lyotard sought to contest the notion of modern independent subjects through the concept of *infantia*. He argued that the modern ideal of liberation, which presupposes individuals possessing absolute knowledge, will, and emotion, as well as authority over their own knowledge and emotions, is nothing more than a fairy tale because every subject is inevitably influenced by others. “By infancy, I mean that we are born before being unto ourselves. And therefore, we are born through others, but also born to others, handed over defenseless to others” (Lyotard, 1992, p. 420). According to Lyotard, true emancipation in childhood does not entail liberation devoid of otherness as in modernity, but rather involves learning to embrace the influence of others and heed the guidance of genuine authority. Fry elaborates on this point by stating:

Lyotard understands infancy as ‘... the condition of being affected...’ which he connects to the impact of otherness upon us. Rather than thinking of humans as maturing into total self-reliance and control, Lyotard understands that otherness affects us and cannot separated from us or controlled by us (Fry, 2014, p. 242).

Lyotard states:

Infancy... something that will never be defeated (by Western ‘emancipation’ or ‘enlightenment’, or ‘reason’), at least as long as humans will be born infants, *infantes*. *Infantia* is the guarantee that there remains an enigma in us, a not easily communicable opacity - that something is left that remains, and that we must bear witness to it (Lyotard, 1992, p. 402).

In childhood studies, there is a growing focus on the theory of reconstructing childhood subjectivity. David Kennedy considers childhood as a distinct form of subjectivity that deconstructs modern subjectivity, emphasizing primarily the formative nature and intersubjectivity of childhood. Kennedy elucidates the incompleteness or formative characteristics of childhood through the concepts of “nomadic subject” by Deleuze and “the subject in process” by Julia



Kristeva. According to his perspective, the postmodern child represents a permanent revolution in subjectivity and a redefinition of the very concept of “subject.” “Becoming-child is to immerse oneself in a world of pure immanence that deterritorializes and deconstructs the discrete Cartesian ‘sovereign subject’” (Kennedy, 2013, p. 148). Consequently, the subject symbolized by childhood is characterized as mobile, ambiguous, pluralistic, adaptable to change and continually undergoing construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction.

The subject in the process is a form of subjectivity that remains perpetually unrealized, with its development constantly evolving into something else. Furthermore, the self in childhood is not an independent entity but rather one embedded within multiple relationships—a conversational self-representing form of intersubjectivity that blurs the rigid boundaries between humans and others, humans and the world, and achieves a unity of self and the world. Within this self, the relationships between various dimensions remain fluid and subject to continuous reconstruction. “The child is an experimental being in rapid and continual reorganization—a being in which the elements of self-engage in dialogue, both internally and with the external world” (Kennedy, 2006, p. 99). Kennedy also references Derrida’s perspective to discuss the characteristics of intersubjectivity, highlighting that the human subject is constructed through comparison with its opposites, such as “nature, animality, etc.” “His ‘child’ symbolizes both the ultimate possible unification of the human subject—an ‘access to life without difference’—and its loss to itself through that very unification” (Kennedy, 2006, p. 23).

Through our previous analysis, we have observed significant changes within the realm of childhood studies under the influence of postmodernism. These changes have led to new insights into the concept of childhood, the paradigm of childhood studies, and the humanistic values associated with childhood. While these new understandings have brought about numerous positive effects, they have also introduced potential dangers into the field of childhood studies. Similarly, the impact of the postmodern shift in childhood studies on education has been notably positive, significantly influencing the

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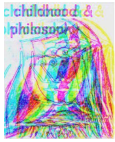
reform of the concepts of children within the field of education. However, it has also presented a series of challenges that warrant thoughtful consideration.

the positive pedagogical implications of the postmodern turn in childhood studies

Under the sway of postmodernism, the field of childhood studies embodies anti-essentialism, anti-dualism, and anti-subjectivity, advocating for the recognition of differences, heterogeneity, generational shifts, and the fluidity of childhood. These novel ideas have exerted numerous positive influences on the field of education. They encourage attention to children's individual differences rather than adhering to unified and abstract models, promote exploration into the multifaceted factors influencing childhood, and strive to eradicate adultism from educational practices, favoring the integration of diverse perspectives for comprehending children.

In previous research on childhood, the pursuit of the "essence" and "unity" of childhood has been dominant. Researchers have often focused on uncovering universal developmental patterns applicable to all children, aiming to create abstract frameworks for adults to guide childhood experiences. However, under the influence of postmodernism, such endeavors are deemed futile because the purported "essence" of childhood and the notion of a unified developmental trajectory for children are considered non-existent. These ideas deeply influenced the understanding of children and education. For instance, Gunilla Dahlberg highlighted that shortcomings in modern education stem from the conceptualization of childhood, which is the abstract pursuit of a universal law governing children's development. Hence, the pivotal aspect in improving educational quality lies in reassessing childhood through a postmodern lens and embracing an anti-essentialist and diversified perspective. Dahlberg further elaborates:

From our postmodern perspective, there is no such thing as 'the child' or 'childhood', an essential being and state waiting to be discovered, defined and realized, so that we can say to ourselves and others- 'that is how children are, that is what childhood is'. Instead, there are many children and many childhoods, each constructed by our 'understandings of childhood and what children are and should be' (Dahlberg et al., 1999, p. 43).



In the realm of education nowadays what prevails is the uniqueness of each individual child, the inherent differences among them, and the diverse historical and societal contexts shaping children's identities. Childhood has transitioned from a concept of "unity" to one of "difference," prompting a profound realization of the limitations inherent in teachers' understanding of children. Children cannot be regarded as objects of education and cannot be fully understood by teachers. Therefore, we must abandon our efforts to achieve a unified understanding of all children and instead adopt a more pluralistic approach to understanding childhood. As Alloway states, "It seems that there is no one truth about what constitutes the child, no essence of childhood that can be distilled outside of social and historical definitions, no reliable or simplistic referent for teachers to draw on" (Alloway, 1997, p. 4). So as teachers, we need to pay attention to children from different historical backgrounds, societies, cultures, and classes, which will enable us to perceive a more nuanced view of childhood. Under the influence of the postmodern turn in childhood studies, educators must discard previous notions of childhood solely defined by natural or social dimensions and instead explore children within the complex web of multiple influences.

Postmodern childhood studies also contribute to education by prompting reflection on adult-centrism, defined as the tendency to use adults as benchmarks to gauge children's development, thus viewing childhood as an inferior version of adulthood. Traditional theories of child development position childhood as subordinate to adulthood, with adulthood serving as the ultimate goal of development, reflecting a discourse of adult-centrism within education. The postmodern discourse of childhood studies aims to emancipate childhood from adult-centric perspectives, and it suggests that the concept of children and the dynamic between children and adults can undergo further reconstruction. Children cease to be perceived as objects to be shaped or disciplined, while adults no longer assume the role of educators possessing mastery over children's development and the cultivation of rationality. The roles of teachers and students undergo quiet deconstruction and reconstruction. Educators prioritize fostering dialogue and interaction between children and adults within educational contexts.

As Petropoulos states, “Children should be invited to develop their own voice in Philosophy for/with children(P4wC), which can open the space for intergenerational dialogue between adult and child” (Petropoulos, 2023, p. 1).

Moreover, within the process of postmodernist reflection on modern subjectivity, childhood presents an alternative perspective, contributing to the reconstruction of postmodern subjectivity. In light of this notion, educators are encouraged to forge “new subjects for children.” Postmodern children challenge the notion of being mere “educatees” and instead emerge as accountable subjects capable of initiating actions. They do not conform to a predetermined "direction of expectation" as envisioned in modernity, which presupposes a fixed nature; rather, they embody a fluid and evolving subjectivity devoid of such expectations from the outset. Consequently, with a shift in understanding children’s subjectivity, the essence of education is transformed and is no longer solely focused on controlling and maneuvering children’s development. This evolution underscores the fragility of education, providing a canvas for the emergence of new subjects for children. “Keeping education open for the event of subjectivity to occur does, of course, come with a risk, because when we keep education open anything can happen, anything can arrive... it is only when we are willing to take this risk that the event of subjectivity has a chance to occur” (Biesta, 2013, p. 23).

the challenges to education brought by the postmodern turn in childhood studies

Change and vitality in postmodernism are well represented in the field of childhood studies, and moves these studies in a more open and pluralistic direction, thereby exerting a positive influence on the field of education. However, the postmodern shift in childhood studies also harbors many dangers, which will pose challenges to education, particularly concerning the anti-essentialism of the postmodern understanding of childhood and the excessive emphasis on differences in childhood, which raises questions about its nature and good education.

Currently, the anti-essentialism of postmodernism has come under scrutiny, with the most significant issue lying in its logical dilemma implicit in its complete



rejection of “essence.” The same issue arises in the postmodern perspective of childhood and education. Firstly, the postmodern perspective of childhood not only asserts the absence of an absolute essence of childhood but also advocates an ontological contemplation of childhood differences, which presents a logical contradiction. It cannot simply dismiss the possibility of “childhood having an absolute essence” because that contradicts the inclusive nature of the theory of difference. Secondly, it tends to lead childhood studies towards relativism, forsaking the development of the concept of childhood and solely focusing on the construction of childhood as a social fact. “Childhood is influenced by numerous factors, yet there is no inquiry into the significance of childhood itself or the type of childhood children should experience” (Miao, 2016).

Educational thought, influenced by the postmodern perspective of childhood, encounters similar challenges. Within the field of education, there have been numerous critiques regarding essentialist ideas. With the added impact of postmodern perspectives from childhood studies, the exploration of the “essence” of childhood within education has been deemed inappropriate. Can educational research cease to question what constitutes a good childhood? How should we delve into the essence of education and pursue shifts in educational thought? As differences emerge into education, every culture, society, or individual’s construction of childhood is deemed valid. Yet, this embrace of free and pluralistic viewpoints also leads to another form of closure, potentially shutting down channels of dialogue due to the absence of universal values in evaluating various childhood constructions. Consequently, the inquiry into “what constitutes good education,” which inherently involves value judgments, becomes a false proposition. “It can no longer be dedicated-in its various forms-to the achievement of universally applicable goals-truth, emancipation, democracy, enlightenment, empowerment-pre-defined by the grand narratives” (Edwards & Usher, 1994, p. 211).

The deconstruction of the “childhood and adulthood” construct in postmodern childhood studies will also present certain challenges to education. On one hand, in the process of subverting the order of binary opposition between

children and adults within the realm of education is likely to be further intensified. The crisis of authority may intensify the relationship between children and teachers or leave the children without direction. As Eagleton noted in his critique of postmodernism:

... for all its talk of difference, plurality, heterogeneity, postmodern theory often operates with quite rigid binary oppositions, with 'difference', 'plurality' and allied terms lined up bravely on one side of the theoretical fence as unequivocally positive, and whatever their antitheses might be (unity, identity, totality, universality) ranged balefully on the other (Eagleton, 1996, p. 26).

This issue also arises within the postmodern perspective on childhood. There are many new understandings of childhood, such as Sandra Harding characterizing the child as a “valuable stranger” or Kristeva’s concept of the “subject-in-process,” which aim to accentuate the disparity between childhood and adulthood and thus underscore childhood’s distinctiveness. There is another way to rebuild the relationship between childhood and adulthood. For example, by removing the notion of adulthood as a point of reference for childhood, the Romantics propose that adulthood should instead be evaluated through the lens of childhood, as the child’s form of life is at a “higher” level. However, this interpretation of the childhood-adulthood relationship does not contribute to diminishing antagonistic dynamics between children and adults, but still places children in opposition to adults.

As the field of education advocates for children’s rights, pursues equality, and promotes children as active social agents within the structure of childhood, the powerful concepts of equality, universal empowerment, and structural theory in modernity theory become significant. “Education does not fit easily into the postmodern moment because educational theory and practice are ‘founded’ in the modernist tradition” (Meynert, 2013, p. 140). With the rejection of metanarratives and structures in postmodern thought, many educational propositions lose their crucial theoretical underpinnings. Moreover, if the concept of “becoming-child” is further emphasized, childhood will occupy a space of transformation, rather than being merely an age-related phase. The elimination of the dichotomy between childhood and adulthood also undermines the necessity of the concept of childhood altogether; consequently, childhood ceases to exist, and education loses



its fundamental basis.

The postmodern view of childhood, which involves deconstructing modern subjectivity, poses certain dangers to education. For instance, the mobile and changing construction of children's subjectivity in education may result in a lack of educational relevance. As the modern rational subject is replaced by notions of flux, change, and intersubjectivity, individuals may no longer seek a life anchor but instead prioritize change and desires. Best and Kellner (1991, p. 284) aptly point out this contradiction within some postmodern theories: "while theoretically it dispenses with the individual, it simultaneously resurrects it in a post-liberal form, as an aestheticized, desiring monad." Consequently, when childhood no longer defines itself based on specific core qualities but becomes synonymous with mobility, change, and desire, pertinent questions arise. Does this evolving and mobile subjectivity, as exemplified by childhood, necessitate boundaries? Do concepts of identity and stability hold no significance in childhood subjectivity? Best and Kellner further argue that,

Just as one does not need a new car or wardrobe every year, one does not constantly need a new subjectivity. While there is much to say in favor of personal growth and development, and even psychic decentering as Laing and Cooper suggest, there are also positive forms of identity and stability that require experimentation, such as having consistent progressive political commitments and maintaining some core characteristics of creative subjectivity (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 107).

The subjectivity in education has confronted a similar crisis. "Although education continues to contribute to the formation of subjectivity, subjectivity itself has become a site of struggle and it is no longer very fixed and invariable nor exclusively the subjectivity of the 'rational man'" (Meynert, 2013, p. 141). When education embraces a wholly mobile and evolving subjectivity without questioning its identity and stability, its admirable risk may devolve into a meaningless adventure. Consequently, it forfeits the fundamental elements that define education as education.

In conclusion, when education delves into the study of postmodern childhood, both its promises and dangers permeate the educational domain. The postmodern conception of childhood infuses vitality into education, as it

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encourages attention to children's individual differences, promotes exploration of the multifaceted factors influencing childhood, emphasizes the construction of new forms of child agency in education, strives to eliminate adultism from educational practices, and fosters more intergenerational dialogue between adults and children. However, its perils are also apparent, particularly in raising questions about the nature of childhood and good education. Additionally, the construction of a fluid and changing image of child agency in education may lead to issues such as the lack of educational significance. As the postmodern view of childhood endeavors to dismiss all discourse concerning the existence, essence, truth, and order of childhood, and instead advocates for a wholly distinct, pluralistic, and dynamic childhood, there is a risk of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Which is also the possible fate of the postmodern view of education.

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