

Childhood – 2025 and Beyond

Professor Alan Prout
University of Warwick

'Prediction is very difficult, especially about the future.'

Niels Bohr

Danish physicist (1885 - 1962)

Introduction

Bohr's quip serves to remind us just how tricky is the task set for the Challenge Papers. The question that was suggested for this particular paper was: 'How might childhood change over the next 18 years as a result of developments in technology?'. This is a good question. Nevertheless, the role of technology clearly cannot be understood apart from the other factors that have shaped childhood in the past and will continue to do so into the future. These include demographic, social, cultural and economic dimensions – all of which are intertwined with technological developments. Seen in this way childhood is best understood as an emergent 'assemblage' (after Deleuze) or 'actor-network' (after Latour), shifting as new forms are composed through these different forces and materials, each of which is reciprocally constituted in relation to the others. I expect that the broad agenda sketched below will be narrowed down. Furthermore I have deliberately painted a broadly picture childhood, in the expectation that this will raise issues that need to be connected to the other Challenge Papers and thus facilitate the most productive discussion.

Overview

In this paper I will first set out some key trends in childhood, including:

- Demographic – ageing population
- Diversification of living conditions and life chances
- Plural socialization
- Surveillance and regulation
- Individualization, consumption, voice and choice
- Emerging technological supplements

Second, I will suggest that the speed and direction of change in childhood will be governed primarily, though not exclusively, by global economic events.

Third, I will frame some questions for further enquiry.

Finally, I will suggest some ideas about how the Childhood Challenge enquiry might be taken forward.

Key trends in Changing Childhood

(i) Demographics

In Western countries (by which I mean broadly those included in the OECD), there has been a general decline in the birth rate and an increase in life expectancy, that together bring about an ageing population. For example, the countries of the European Union now have fertility rates below the threshold of generational replacement. As a result it has been projected that in Europe by 2025 the numbers in the 0-19 age group will fall by over 10% (European Union, 1996). This prospect is well known but what is less generally appreciated is that, if accepted models of demographic transition hold true, the world picture by 2050 will be as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Proportion of children (0-14) in population (2007, World Population Prospects, UN)

	2005	2050
World	28.3	19.8
Africa	41.4	28
Latin America	29.8	18
Asia	28	18
Oceania	24.9	18.4
N. America	20.5	17.1
Europe	15.9	14.6

What might the implications of this be for children? First, it could also be noted that according to the notion of a 'demographic dividend' (Bloom, Canning and Sevilla, 2003) greater economic growth will be seen in those countries with a rising share of working age people in the population. This predicts economic growth in the Asian and Latin American countries, accompanied by retrenchment in North America and (especially) Europe.

Second, there may be a 'double whammy' for children. Even as economic resources diminish, some social policy analysts have argued that we have seen, and will see a further, redistribution of social resources away from children towards older people. This raises important issues about how justice in the distribution of resources between the generations can be achieved and maintained (Thompson, 1989; Sgritta, 1994: 361). These are linked to questions about how children's voice might be heard and their interests represented in decisions and debates about resource distribution.

(ii) Children's Living Conditions and Life Chances

Trends can be detected in four main dimensions: changes in the world economy; internal patterns of income distribution within western countries; changed patterns of family life; and changed patterns of migration.

First, from a global economy perspective the stark division of children's life chances is obvious. However, economic trends are not overall marked by a growing divergence of the richest from the rest – although this is the position in sub-Saharan Africa. From the 1990s onward average incomes rose in Latin America, the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa. East Asia has seen rapid economic growth powered primarily by the industrialization of China, an economy growing over the last quarter of a century at 10% per annum. It is now the second largest economy in the world (when measured by purchasing power parity) and the fourth (in terms of nominal GDP). Whilst the rural population of China has income levels below the poverty line, the average disposable income in towns and cities - home to two-fifths of China's 1.3bn people – is rising rapidly. Similar trends can be seen in India. In Brazil and Russia growth is also rapid, powered not only by growing industrial production but also by rapidly rising commodity prices (notably oil, natural gas, industrial and precious metals and agricultural products). From this point of view the trajectory is towards a globally narrowing gap in children's living conditions and life chances. There is a moving gradient between the savings, production and investment oriented pattern of rising economic powers and the debt-laden, consumption, service and finance dominated economies of the West. In short, changed fortunes for nations and their children seem a real possibility.

Second, OECD data on the internal distribution patterns of western countries suggest that income distribution between children is becoming more unequal. Of the seventeen countries studied twelve showed growing income inequality between children. (Oxley et al, 2001: 378). International comparison of trends in child poverty presents a complex picture and is subject to many methodological difficulties. Nevertheless, a recent analysis of Luxemburg Income Study data suggests that during the last quarter of a century the proportion of children in families with less than 50% of median income rose in eleven of the twenty countries studied. These included Australia, Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, the UK and the USA (Bradshaw, 2000: 240). Increasingly too the protective capacity of welfare

state regimes (whether neo-liberal, corporatist or social democratic in form – see Esping Andersen, 1990) also seems to be weakening and marked by 'a seemingly universal trade-off between equality and employment' (Esping-Andersen, 1996: 25).

Third, is evidence of an increased differentiation of the family circumstances of children. Most Western countries have seen a steady demographic decline in the nuclear family. This is the product of a number of linked trends in population and household formation. These are: a decline in the number of marriages and a rise in the number of divorces; an increase in cohabitation, especially in the northern European countries; and a diversification in family types, including the growth in stepfamilies and lone parent families (Ruxton, 1996). There are differences between countries but the overall trend and general direction is the same. In the UK, for example, the number of nuclear families has fallen from 38% of all households at the start of the 1960s to 25% by the mid 1990s. Although children living in two-parent households are still the majority, the proportion living in single parent households has doubled, to about 20%, over the last thirty years (Clarke, 1996; Office of National Statistics, 1999).

The fourth source of diversity is trans-national migration. Although international statistics are not really adequate to the task of characterizing flows of people between countries, it seems that they are on the increase. According to the UN, between 1965 and 1990 the total number of migrants in Western countries increased nine-fold (ILO, 2003: 26). The world stock of migrants is also increasing, from 1.2% in 1965-75 to 2.6% in 1985-95 (ILO, 2003: 26). These processes have implications for the growth in racial and ethnic diversity among children in both Europe and the USA, a trend that is set to continue over the next decades (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 1999: 5; Commission of the European Community, 2001). This trend has implications for the diversity of childhood, children's lived experience and the formation of their identity (Connolly, 1998; Garcia-Coll et al, 2004; Orellana et al, 2001).

(iii) Plural Socialization

Whilst the above discussion raises important questions about the demographic and economic context of childhood, in this section I will directly address the relationship between childhood and technology. A key affordance that information and communication technologies create is the (transnational) flow of information, values and images, with which many children routinely engage everyday (Buckingham, 2000). These flows have profound implications for patterns of socialization. Contemporary social science has for some time recognized the increasing complexity of socialization processes that occurs when young children begin to spend a large part of their daily life away from the family - at school, in after-school clubs or in day care institutions. This gave rise to the idea of 'double socialization'. The German educationalist Giesecke (1985), however, has suggested that we need to acknowledge that children, like adults, live in a pluralistic society. They are confronted by a range of competing, complementary and divergent values and perspectives from parents, school, the media, the consumer society and their peer relations. He suggests parents, teachers and others who care for children have less power to control and steer these different factors as a whole. It becomes, therefore, important to understand children as individually and collectively trying to make coherence and sense of the world in which they live (Christensen and Prout, 2004).

ICTs have played a central role in the pluralization of socialization. Until recently the understanding of ICTs has been dominated by polarized positions often summarized by the use of terms such as "cyber-critics" (ICTs are destroying childhood) and "cyber-utopians" (children are the vanguard of new ways of thinking and learning). However, both positions can be criticized for essentializing the category child, underestimating differences between children, denying children's capacity to be social actors and for employing technologically determinist arguments (Buckingham, 2001; Holloway and Valentine, 2001). Others have suggested the need for more complex discourses around children. For example, Selwyn (2003) has identified six different discourses around children users of technology. Valentine and Holloway (2002: 316) similarly found that different children use the Internet in

different ways, often integrating them into their existing relationships. It is clear in this context that access to ICTs remains uneven and unequal. Lee (2001) has pointed out that ICTs are one of many technologies emergent over the past fifty years that have weakened the boundary between the private space (of home and family) and the public space (of school and work) – and that this has been both supported by and has created change in gender and generational relationships. Castells (2000) argues that ICTs have shaped new forms of identity politics, often through resistance and opposition. All kinds of movements resist the logic of network society: religious fundamentalism, nationalism, ethnicity, localism, environmentalism, feminism and sexual identity movements. Prout (2005) argues that global products and communication processes have paradoxical effects, bringing about both cultural homogenization and differentiation in childhood experience. They connect the local and the global, making the same beliefs and values, for example in liberal democracy or fundamentalist religious belief, available everywhere. In doing so they expand the possibility of what an individual in any locality might choose to accept and engage with in the production of their local meanings. They therefore also expand the possibilities cultural syncretism and hybridity of identity and of meaning. Their affordance of plurality nurtures relativism, compelling one community of belief to acknowledge the existence of the others. That recognition, however, can entail opposition and hatred and as well as tolerance.

The outcome of the encounter between childhood and ICTs is uncertain and still emergent. It is clear, however, that whatever direction it takes in the future, it has, for the moment, begun to create shifts in children's position and the character of childhood. Through them children can extend the reach of their experience and multiply the range of the facts and values that they encounter. This occurs within the context of their existing everyday lives and not as a disjuncture from it, suggesting that it can be played out in many different ways. Some of these will reproduce existing relationships and others will create new directions and possibilities. Because it has a rhizomic character, this process is best understood as being driven by multiple influences. Devices and technologies are not inserted into social relations from the outside. They are created and create effects within a particular social and economic context and it is to this whole network of connections that we must look if we are to grasp the process. This suggests that the 'effects' of new information and communications technologies will not fold into childhood in any simple or uncontested way.

(iv) Surveillance and Regulation

The twentieth century has witnessed increased levels of institutional control over children. The introduction of compulsory schooling in many but not all countries and children's formal exclusion from paid work signaled a historical tendency towards children's increasing compartmentalization in specifically designated, separate settings, supervised by professionals and structured according to age and ability. Nasman (1995) has called this process the 'institutionalization of childhood'. Throughout the twentieth century schooling has gradually been extended both 'upwards' (for example in incremental steps towards an older leaving age for compulsory schooling) and 'downwards' in the growing emphasis on pre-school education and nursery provision (Moss, Dillon and Statham, 2000.) Even leisure time is often framed in this way for many children because activities such as sport or music increasingly take place within some kind of institutional setting. It can be seen in the provision of after-school and holiday clubs that organize and regulate children's activities under an adult gaze, channeling them into forms considered developmentally healthy and productive. Such phenomena have been noted across European societies. German sociologists, for example, have used the terms 'domestication' to describe the progressive removal of children from the streets and other public spaces and their relocation in special, protected spaces. They use the term 'insularization' to describe the decreased levels of children's autonomous mobility around cities and the creation of special 'islands' of childhood to and from which they are transported (Zeicher, 2001; Zeicher, 2002).

Within these institutions, but with significant variations according to national policy, it is possible to discern a tightening of the effort to regulate children and to shape more firmly the outcomes of their activities. Schooling is a good example of this. In the last decades of the

twentieth century the rather instrumental schooling regimes of the 'Tiger Economies' of SE Asia were held up as the model for producing economic efficiency and were widely influential in changing educational systems in Europe. I have argued that this phenomenon represents a refocusing of modernity's drive to control the future through children (Prout, 2000). This tightening of control over children derives from a declining faith in other mechanisms of economic control, combined with increasing competitive pressures from the world economy. The intensification of global competition and the intricate networking of national economies erode the state's capacity to control its own economic activity. In such circumstances, shaping children as the future labour force is seen as an increasingly important option.

The most recent vehicle for the regulation of childhood is the idea of the so-called 'social investment state'. These shift state expenditures away from the old welfare state goals of social welfare and distributional justice, placing far greater emphasis on the idea of state investment for production and economic efficiency. If this trend is maintained it then social policy appears likely to move beyond consumption support, aiming for greater social and economic development of households, communities, and the society and economy as a whole. Children, because they are seen as more flexible and biddable are a prime target of such policies, constituting them as key economic assets for future economic deployment. Lister (2003) suggests that in this framework it becomes the child as a *worker*-citizen of the future, rather than the child as a *democratic*-citizen, who is the concern of policy. This instrumental conceptualization of children displaces both children's right to a childhood and an emphasis on their present welfare, and also renders spending defensible only with demonstrable outcomes. Esping-Andersen (2002) collects up many recent trends in the welfare state into this new category, including: the growth of early childhood services; the integration of previously separate educational, welfare and health services into a (more) unified children's service; curriculum and quality standards for schools; and extended school provision.

(v) Individualization, consumption, voice and choice

Finally, and in (partial) contradiction to the last trend, we can see the emergence of the idea that children should be active participants in shaping their lives and should have a voice and choice in decision-making at all levels – as consumers and as quasi-citizens. This idea began to move from the margins of public debate only in the last two or three decades of the twentieth century. In part its emergence was to do with a more general shift in institutional practice that affected children and adults alike. Rapid social change has eroded and fragmented once taken-for-granted institutions and has led to a new sense of uncertainty and risk (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990, 1991). A widespread response to this has been the installation of techniques of reflexivity into institutional practice.

This tendency can be located within a larger phenomenon: 'individualization'. According to Beck (1998) this is a trend towards people (including, I suggest, children) coming to think of themselves as unique individuals with chosen rather than prescribed or standard identities. This requires not fewer but different sources of social interdependency because although such individuals are produced through collectivities (such as family, locality and class), they are not bound to them in traditional ways. It is important to understand that individualization is the product of new *social* processes. A concatenation of factors, rather than a single cause, is said to be responsible for this shift. The emergence of consumption (especially leisure) as a source of identity, the pluralization of family forms, the decline in the authority of expert knowledges, the distribution of norms about the value of democracy and so on, all contribute to a process that has become self-propelling. The concept of individualization makes it possible to see the emergence of ideas about children as persons in their own right in a wider societal and historical context. Young people, Beck writes that young people:

"...no longer become individualized. They individualize themselves. The 'biographization' of youth means becoming active, struggling and designing one's own life."
(Beck, 1998: 78)

At the same time these processes take place 'behind the backs' of social institutions, leaving them lagging behind or struggling to adapt. Good examples of this are the widespread concern about the disengagement of young people from traditional forms of democratic participation (Wilkinson and Mulgan, 1995) and from schooling (OECD, 2001). Proposals for the personalization of learning can be seen as a direct response to school disengagement, as well as a possibility afforded by technologies that distribute learning tasks and opportunities and network them into new spaces and places of children's lives. This raises important questions about how schools might change in order better to relate to how children learn in such informal ways. These issues are intersected by ones of class, gender, (dis)ability and ethnicity). For example, whilst in much of the world the lower educational participation rate of girls is a crucial issue (especially for social and economic development), in the West raising the lower achievement of boys is at the centre of concern. Related to this are issues (raised above) of how different children have different relationships to different ICT's with different outcomes and consequences.

However, doubts about how long-trending individualization (and its consequences) might be are also legitimate. It seems, for example, that the process is most intense in those economies that have over the past decades oriented most to consumption, where manufacturing has declined and the service and finance sectors have come to account for a majority of economic activity. In the USA and the UK, for example, consumption now makes up around 70% of GDP. One is compelled to ask how economically sustainable this is and, if this pattern were to retrace, whether individualization would also recede.

(vi) Technological Supplements and Extensions to Child Capacities

The role of ICTs in extending children's capacities and experiences has been discussed above. In this final trend I want merely to draw attention to other technologies that have the same effect in rather different ways (see also Prout, 2005, Chap 5). For example, reproductive technologies are already impacting on the possibility of conception occurring at all (IVF), and the detection of disability (pre-natal screening) and gender selection (pre-natal testing). Emergent technologies are pointing to genetic manipulation, individualized treatment through 'pharmaco-genetics', and human cloning. In addition, to reproductive technologies are 'smart drugs' and 'smart nutrients' that build on the existing capacities of neuro-pharmaceuticals (such as Prozac and Ritalin). These 'nootropics' aim at enhancing cognitive (and other) performance. At present these are aimed primarily at older people, promising to delay the effects of ageing and/or degenerative disease. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that the temptation to find applications for children will be resisted. These might also be developed alongside software that aims through mental exercises to achieve the same goal.

Discontinuities and Continuities

The emergence of new and different forms of childhood happens in non-linear ways, with different rates of change and rhythms (evolutionary, demographic, historical, social and individual), across different scales (global, country specific, regional, local, familial and individual) and is marked by combined and uneven development, cross-currents and paradoxes. Uncertainty is, therefore, a given.

In my view the key issue that will determine how discontinuity dominates the future is whether current global economic trends unfold gradually (a 'soft landing' possibly over decades) or through a more sudden adjustment (a 'hard landing' in the form of an economic crisis felt most strongly in Western countries, probably in the form of an inflationary recession which will institute a painful and definitive shift in economic power that will require years of readjustment). What in fact occurs will be determined by two main factors: how well those charged with steering national economies make their policy decisions; and whether or not the world economy faces an energy imbalance between supply and demand (and if it does how severe the 'oil shock' that results will be).

To be provocative, I will list some possible consequences of a hard landing: a declining standard of living; greater child poverty and heightened inequalities between children; a

further retrenchment of welfare provision and more targeting of social investment in children to economic outcomes; more emphasis on education that serves technical knowledge, innovation and manufacturing production; greater class and ethnic tension; an end to the boom in consumption and individualized life-style choices; more emphasis on saving; and a rediscovery of cooperation and mutuality. This scenario may also bring more conservative social values and a shift from a children's rights to a children's responsibility discourse. A soft landing would bring the same – only more slowly and less intensively. And, of course, none of this may occur at all and the global economy may smoothly reach a new equilibrium and achieve a plateau of universal prosperity with relatively little disruption.

Amongst the continuities that I suggest will be relatively resistant to sharp changes in direction are: demographic change, which is long trending; social and economic inequalities that are resistant to short-term change; continuing development of communication technologies and their diffusion to wider circles of children; further development of reproductive and cognitive enhancement technologies.

Key Questions

(i) What does the evidence suggest are the implications for children of an ageing society? Is there evidence that children's share of resources is declining and/or may decline by 2025? How can an effective voice for children and their interests be created? How does the situation compare across different countries at different points of demographic transition?

(ii) What are the implications for children (in different parts of the world) of a global shift in wealth from North America/ Europe to the newly industrializing countries (e.g. China, India) and resource rich ones (e.g. Brazil, Russia)? Will change happen gradually or more suddenly? What are the prospects for children in the UK?

(iii) Depending on the answer to questions (i) and (ii), what are the dynamics of childhood inequality in the UK? On current evidence, what are the implications of this for education achievement and employment futures? How could education respond to limit harm to children?

(iv) What does the evidence suggest are the implications of changed family patterns for children's life chances? Can we expect a continuation, a plateau or a reversal of existing trends? How can educational institutions respond to diminish or limit harm?

(v) What are the implications of a more ethnically (and religiously) diverse child population? What are the dynamics of children's identity-formation and under what conditions would we expect increased or decreased conflict? What is the role of education in this process?

(vi) Questions (iii), (iv) and (v) might be condensed into a broader query: whether and how can schools adapt to a more diverse child population? In governance system? Organizationally? Pedagogically? Are emergent new learning styles (Digital Natives?) better adapted to diversity? What differences are there between how children are expected to learn at school and how they learn 'in the wild'? What does the evidence suggest about differences in class, gender, (dis)ability and ethnicity?

(vii) More broadly still, how do the institutions of the 'social investment state' understand and deal with children? How will they adapt to economic and welfare state retrenchment? Greater integration of services and/or greater specialization? What pressures to channel children into economically productive educational activities will be created?

(viii) Will the forces that have individualized children - as consumers, as self-biographers and as quasi-citizens with rights to choice and voice - wax or wane over the next period? Will the social mood turn more to responsibilities than rights? How will this affect relationships of gender, (dis)ability and ethnicity? Will economic retrenchment lead children themselves to make more instrumental choices in education? (For example, if a rebalancing

of the UK economy towards production occurs will this create conditions in which more children themselves choose to study science, maths and technology?). Is 'personalization' of learning a short or long-term trend?

(ix) How will new technologies play into parent-child and child-adult (generational) relationships? How will this vary by social class, gender, (dis)ability and ethnicity? How will family practices and uses of household and non-household space change through new technological affordances?

(x) What new technologies will emerge as supplements and extensions to children's capacities. Clearly the development of ICTs is crucial. But what, for example, will be the role of psycho-pharmaceuticals, such as so-called cognitive-enhancers? What new capacities will these create? What social divisions (or patterns of inclusion and exclusion) will they magnify and/or create?

(xi) How will all these questions play out differently across nations in economic expansion or retrenchment? For example, will Chinese children orient more to consumption (and the individualization that may accompany it)? Will their positive attitudes to education change in these circumstances? If so, how and how fast?

Moving Enquiry Forward

Given that no new empirical research will take place, the key tasks are to:

- (i) ensure that the key trends have been identified, amending, adding and subtracting as necessary;
- (ii) develop and refine the key questions;
- (iii) cast a broad net to gather evidence relevant to the questions, consulting with appropriate disciplinary, education and policy experts and other stakeholders;
- (iv) prepare a discussion paper for consultation at the September 2008 EAG meeting;
- (v) draft a final draft document for the Feb 2009 EAG meeting.

The methods used to achieve these will include: further desk research by a research assistant; individual consultation with experts and stakeholders; seminars bringing together (around 15) experts and stakeholders.

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