

Abstract

This paper takes the theme of uncertainty as a starting point to argue for a critical childhood studies which does not only wish to produce knowledge about children and childhood but is also responsive to the calls of our uncertain times and seeks to produce knowledge that matters for children's lives. To do this, the paper argues, it is important to critique and deconstruct the current conditions of children's lives but to also produce the kind of knowledge which would have the capacity to offer us new insights into the possibilities for crafting alternative futures for children—with children—that address the uncertainties and difficulties which lie ahead. Developing a critical childhood studies will ultimately help the field move towards decolonising itself by becoming more inclusive and democratic as well as becoming more socially relevant by engaging with its diverse publics.

Keywords: childhood, critical childhood studies, children's realities, decolonizing childhood studies

Resumo

Este artigo toma o tema da incerteza como ponto de partida para defender estudos da criança críticos que não desejem apenas produzir conhecimento sobre crianças e infância, mas que também respondam aos apelos dos tempos de incerteza e procurem produzir conhecimento relevante para a vida das crianças. Neste seguimento, o artigo argumenta que é importante criticar e desconstruir as condições atuais da vida das crianças, mas também produzir o tipo de conhecimento que teria a capacidade de nos oferecer novos *insights* sobre as possibilidades de elaborar futuros alternativos para as crianças – com crianças – que abordam as incertezas e dificuldades que estão por vir. O

desenvolvimento de estudos da criança críticos acabará por ajudar esta área a descolonizar-se, tornando-se mais inclusiva e democrática, além de se tornar socialmente mais relevante ao envolver-se com os diversos públicos.

Palavras-chave: infância, estudos críticos da infância, realidades infantis, estudos infantis descolonizadores

There is no doubt that we live in uncertain times. We are not only confronted with multiple ongoing crises—from the food crisis, to the migration crisis, and the most pressing existential one, the climate crisis—but more importantly we have not, so far, developed adequate responses to these challenges that would offer us some justified hope about the future. This uncertainty and an emerging sense of anxiety about the future is evident in all realms of life and childhood researchers are not exceptional in trying to make sense of how this uncertainty manifests in everyday life. ‘Researching children’s worlds and lived realities in uncertain times’ was the theme title of the first international conference which was jointly organised in September 2022 by the Research Centre on Child Studies at the University of Minho and the Centre for the Study of Children and Childhood at the University of Suffolk. The conference provided generative space for reflecting on what the uncertain times we live in might mean for the research work we do with children and the kind of knowledge we are able to produce.

In this brief, reflective paper, I take the theme of uncertainty (including the opportunities and challenges which it alludes to) as a starting point to argue for an expansive vision of childhood studies—what I will refer to here as *critical childhood studies* (see Alanen 2011)—which does not only wish to produce knowledge about children and childhood but is responsive to the calls of our uncertain times and seeks to produce knowledge that matters for children’s lives. This, in my opinion, is both necessary and essential, not only in order to enhance our understanding of children’s lives but also in order to produce the kind of knowledge that goes beyond a mere critique of the conditions of childhood which is certainly a necessary first step but not a sufficient one. Here, I am thinking of a forward-looking kind of knowledge which would have the capacity to offer us new insights into the possibilities for crafting alternative futures for children—with children—that address the uncertainties and difficulties which lie ahead.

But why call for a *critical* childhood studies? How can a critical orientation for the field offer us knowledge that is valuable for our uncertain times? Or, put another way, why privilege this kind of knowledge production?

To call for a critical childhood studies, is first and foremost to call for knowledge production that is not only attuned to our times and the challenges that children face in their daily lives but also seeks to address the challenges of the future and in doing so make a difference. It is to prioritize and generate the kind of knowledge which critiques and deconstructs the current conditions of children’s lives but is also imaginative and

daring in exploring alternatives which are informed by the structural realities of children's lives as well as their own perspectives and the perspectives of all those who are implicated one way or another in their lives. This is not about foreclosing children's future possibilities for existence but rather offering ways out of the oppressive and largely unsustainable trajectories we are caught in and the disproportionate impact this is likely to have to current and future generations of children. The knowledge which may come out of this kind of critical engagement should be open-ended, reflexive, revisable and humble but nevertheless engaged with ways of improving children's material conditions of life (Spyrou 2018). The aim of a critical childhood studies would then be to retain a highly localised and situated perspective that reflects the empirical realities of the children it seeks to address while simultaneously connecting this perspective with the larger-scale processes at work which escape children's localities but nevertheless impact their lives in significant ways. Producing knowledge about children and childhood that is critical will also inadvertently contribute towards the field becoming more socially relevant. However, in order to become more socially relevant, childhood studies would also have to engage more squarely with its various publics (Spyrou 2021). That would require that we, as childhood scholars, reframe the field and its knowledge productions in ways that allow us to enter into dialogue with our diverse audiences, be they children, parents, social workers, teachers, policy makers, or the general public. A critical childhood studies, in this sense, does not have to lose its acuity and theoretical sophistication (and this might mean that it retains to some extent its specialised jargon for internal use) but it would have to recognise that it needs to communicate effectively in ways that are sensitive and respectful of others beyond the field.

However, this is not just about communicating research findings in accessible ways that inform audiences beyond one's micro-tribe or narrow academic community, though that is of course both necessary and important (Alvesson, Gabriel, and Paulsen, 2017). It is also about engaging in public discussion and dialogue with all those who are implicated in the work of the field whether these are the children themselves, their parents or policy-makers. That means that as a field, childhood studies, will need to get outside its own limited frame of reference, to tap into public discussions and concerns, to participate, listen and engage with its diverse audiences and publics in ways that are democratic and inclusive. Only then would a critical childhood studies be able to produce knowledge that is attuned to children's realities and reflective of their needs.

This leads me to another key component of a call for a critical childhood studies, namely the need for the field to open up to other fields, to move beyond its own (quite often insular) ways of thinking, to consider the kinds of engagements that are happening elsewhere and to become more relational in its knowledge productions. Needless to say, that would also require interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary engagements that open up the field to diverse ways of thinking, philosophical traditions and theoretical orientations that can inform but also challenge some of its dominant assumptions and underpinnings. Rather than being a threat to its standing, such a move would actually enhance its place as a critical field that is dynamic, versatile, and generative rather than stagnant and conventional. I would argue that unless childhood studies can draw on but also inform

through its own knowledge productions other fields and areas of inquiry, it will remain insular and of limited utility to ongoing efforts at addressing social problems and concerns faced by children in the contemporary world (Spyrou 2017).

This brings me to my last substantive point in this short reflective piece, namely, the need to decolonise the field in ways that allow it to become more comprehensive and encompassing, more inclusive and democratic, and ultimately more generative so that it can speak to the diverse needs and complex realities of children's worlds in the third decade of the 21st century. At one level, this would be a move towards overcoming its Anglo-Saxon and largely Western orientation with all the problems which accrue from such an orientation which largely dismisses the rest of the world. It is true that the field today is actively seeking to address this problem (Liebel 2020). But, of course, this is not just about including research work from the Global South (though that is again an important first step). It is also about decolonising entrenched theoretical and methodological ways of thinking and assumptions that have become emblematic of the field but are quite limited or even entirely inappropriate for addressing the diverse realities of children around the globe (Abebe 2019; Twum-Danso Imoh 2022; Smith 2012). Relatedly, it is about considering diverse forms of knowledge that could help enrich our understanding of children's lives—whether these are rooted in local ecological or spiritual practices, affective states of being, or social activism—and which can provide valuable conceptual tools for rethinking childhood and children's place in the world.

A critical childhood studies can only be critical for as long as it strives towards decolonising itself. It is important to note, however, that decolonising has no end point, nor is it merely another frame of being as a field. In that sense, claims about decolonising childhood studies should always be kept in check through a relentless self-critique. A decolonising move requires a lot more than isolated, individual efforts at rethinking the field. It requires ongoing, collective work which challenges colonial and neo-colonial relations and structural inequalities including those that manifest in knowledge production. To do so, childhood studies will need to cultivate a more equitable sphere of activity for the field which can ultimately make a difference in how we see, understand and relate to children's lives and to childhood as a globally diverse social phenomenon.

To conclude, all forms of knowledge production (including research and scholarly productions) entail to some extent choice and are therefore in that sense political. Living in uncertain times creates a deep sense of worry about the future but also a deep sense of responsibility about how to effectively address the crises we are confronted with, each from our respective positionality and professional role. There is already significant work in childhood studies that could be characterized as critical. Enhancing the critical strands of research which currently exist in the field can only strengthen our ability as childhood scholars to make interventions, however small and humble, which address the future of children and childhood in an ethical and responsible way.

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Bionote

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