



Frames and debates for disability, childhood and the global South: Introducing the Special Issue

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Editorial: Frames and debates for disability, childhood and the global South: Introducing the Special Issue

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Our understanding of disability, as readers of this journal will be aware, is rooted in the epistemology of disability studies, seeing it not as a medical state contained within the body or mind of a person, but as a socially created phenomenon that takes its shape through social relations, cultural representations, and modes of production and reproduction. This means that disability cannot be discussed in universal or generalised terms, but always requires attention to the specific embodied, social, cultural and economic contexts in which it occurs. This special issue, therefore, seeks to explore the interconnections and intersections of disability, childhood, and South/North relations, three areas that are rarely examined together¹.

Disability and childhood: rationale and mutual configurations

Disability studies is a relatively new academic field that has emerged in part from the disability rights movement and social change activism, spurred largely by people labelled and marginalized as ‘disabled’ in the UK and USA (Thomas, 2004). As such, many of the debates in the field focus on the economic and cultural contexts of the global North. These debates often assume the availability of advanced medical, educational and welfare services and discuss the relations of power within such services (Grech, 2009). Further, while disability studies in North contexts often assumes impairment to be caused by natural and unavoidable conditions, bodies also bear the mark of global power, and the social analysis of disability (particularly in relation to global South contexts) cannot ignore the ways bodies are constructed and impacted through the economic conditions of globalization and post-colonialism (Erevelles, 2014; Grech and Soldatic, 2015; Meekosha, 2011; Meekosha and Soldatic, 2011). Many of the papers in this issue explore how disability is created within different local and national contexts that have been colonized, and which are impacted by increased poverty and global inequality such as Kenya (Corcoran), India (Vaidya), Vietnam (Burr) and Brazil (Do Nascimento et al.). Other authors in this special issue consider North-South relations and how these frame our understandings of disability and childhood (see Nixon et al; and Wolbring and Ghai), or focus on communities impacted by colonialism and extreme poverty, even when geographically located in the global North, such as indigenous people in Canada (see the article by Stienstra).

The emergent paradigm of childhood studies (James et al. 1998) seeks to engage with children’s experiences within social contexts. Under this paradigm, children are considered competent agents with their own status, needs and rights, and not as incomplete or deficient versions of the adults they will one day become. Further, the binary of childhood vs. adulthood is seen as a social construction rather than a process of natural and universal

maturation. However, disabled children are often marginalized in such texts, and their lives are often considered in terms of their deficit in relation to ‘normal’ childhoods, or in relation to debates around education, child development and children services (Curran and Runswick-Cole, 2014). Disabled adults on the other hand, and particularly learning disabled adults, are often considered in mainstream discourses as ‘eternal children’, who can never satisfy the demands of rational and responsible adult autonomy (Erevelles, 2011; Greenstein and Graby, forthcoming). Thus they are often excluded from many spheres of social participation such as sexual activity, independent living or paid employment, with such exclusions framed under the discourse of vulnerability and safeguarding (Beckett, 2006). Therefore, as Slater (2015) argues, the incorporation of critical discourses of disability and of childhood is a necessary tool for scholars who seek to challenge the strict binaries and disabling assumptions that govern adults’ and children’s lives and shape notions of development as a linear process through which children leave the dependent and innocent state of childhood to progress towards responsible, autonomous (non-disabled) adult independence.

Both disability and childhood studies therefore, from their different orientations, trouble or problematize not only understandings of competence, but also trajectories of individual development. Both question the desirable endpoints of individual development and also associated temporalities as mere states to be transcended or passed through, on the way to some more perfect or desirable condition or situation (see for example Burman, 2008). Yet there are asymmetries between the two fields – with childhood clearly characterizing a time-limited period, while being able-bodied or dis-abled may be much more fluid and reversible. There are clear sites of fruitful tension, therefore, as well as convergences between the two fields. Nevertheless, a limitation of both childhood and disability studies is that they have largely emerged and been debated in relation to richer and more ‘developed’ contexts; that is, in relation to the global North. The focus of this special issue is to explore their intersections alongside and in relation to the global South.

Papers in this issue take multiple perspectives on childhood – from theoretical engagement in how childhood and disability are understood (e.g. Nixon et al; Wolbring and Ghai) to empirical papers looking at the lives of disabled children in different national contexts (Burr; Stienstra), those exploring disabling conditions outside of impairment such as poverty and street connectedness (Corcoran; Do Nascimento et al.) and also those examining adults’ accounts of experiences of sexual abuse in childhood (Vaidya). We hope that the combination of these different perspectives allows readers to consider the complexity of issues at the intersection of disability, childhood and global relations, without narrowing those into too simplistic and mutually exclusive binaries of “normal” and “impaired”, “north” or “south”, “adult” or “child”. Further, the papers in this special issue cover a wide methodological range of approaches. There are papers that present findings from original field work (Corcoran, Do Nascimento et al.), while others offer critical analyses of available literatures highlighting cross-cutting themes of disability and global North/South interface (such as Wolbring & Ghai). Some others’ focus combines field work observations with critical disability studies perspectives (Vaidya).

Scope and themes

The main focus for many is the relationship with education (Corcoran on street children in Kenya; Burr on special education and dilemmas of inclusion and segregation in Vietnam; Wolbring and Ghai on robotics). Developing themes around disabling childhoods in a Brazilian context Do Nascimento et al.'s article highlights how in a context where the focus is on creating jobs rather than education for disabled young people the question of the politics of (in)visibility of street-connected children in countering stigmatization acquires new force. Another theme addressed in this issue, arises through a discussion of gender and sexuality. This is posed by Stienstra's paper and taken further by Vaidya in her work on sexual abuse with disabled men and women in their childhoods as well as in adulthood. Burr discusses 'cultural' approaches to beliefs about disability - not just in terms of the essentializing and culturalist tropes of 'collectivist/honour local understandings, but also poverty (Sheper Hughes, 1992), showing how this throws into relief western models. Nixon and colleagues engage in a similar debate on the role of discipline in learning context. The key point from Burr and Nixon et al. is that it is not an underlying medical condition, but rather the dominant societal values, cultural norms, socio-political and economic circumstances, which decide the fate of children (in some ways echoing Trawick's (1990) discussion of case of child failing to thrive in the Tamil family she studied.

Some papers have focused on taking a reflective/analytical stance by interrogating global north/south divides in relation to the role of assistive technology for children and how this structures the prevailing deficit perspectives for children in the global south. In particular, Wolbring and Ghai discuss how new technologies of enhancement are generating both new categorisations and new life forms. They end up drawing on Foucault's (1976) analysis of biopower to argue that 'ability expectation apartheid is one form of social apartheid'. Across various of the papers, the notion of poverty as disabling emerges: drawing on such conceptual resources as Deleuze and Guattari's (Reynolds, 2009) notion of transversality to map the forms of subjectivity generated through postcolonial and ableist relations under neoliberal capitalism. As Do Nascimento et al. argue in their article, 'what is happening to the economically marginalized population in the favela is a global effect', such that poverty becomes figured not only as individual responsibility. That 'global inequity requires a discourse about the poor as being, in the most reductive sense, inherently disabled, incapable, and lacking.' Brazil is heralded as pioneer of democratic inclusion practices in the global south but gap between policy and implementation arises since favelas are scarcely accessed by let alone within the monitoring purview of aid, development and rights organisations, but 'institutions of civil society only as representations of themselves without any actual capacity to function for the majority of the citizenry, much less disabled children, youth, and adults of marginalized economic status.' Still, they end with the example of a young man with physical impairments who nevertheless was integrated and participating in daily life and activities, which they interpret as a form of resistance: 'It is those who experience mind-body difference defined as disability who may be able to lead the way for those of us more recently disenfranchised and marginalized by the proliferation of new and emergent codings of emotional, medical and biological disability.'

These papers provoke, challenge and extend our notions of disability and childhood. Additionally the authors present a global North in global South and global South in global

North (in terms of inclusionary/exclusionary educational, cultural, familial and political discourse). Below we offer highlights from the papers to invite you to engage with the issues and tensions these bring out.

The papers in this issue

In a highly original and innovative South-North collaboration, Nixon et al. highlight a series of tensions in children's rehabilitation through a postcolonial lens. The tensions were identified through what they describe as an iterative 'multi-phased dialogue' between the authors, located in Canada and Cameroon. This process was conducted through a series of workshops (face to face and via skype), complemented by sending written texts and phone calls. The team of authors is comprised of individuals who identify as people with disabilities, rehabilitation activists, rehabilitation providers, and/or rehabilitation researchers in Cameroon and Canada. The paper also offers a description of how a deliberative exercise can be not only consultative but also transformative. The resulting discussion highlights how the aims and roles of rehabilitation with children, shift according to the differing conceptualizations of disability. In comparing the two contexts and challenging medical model of disability, the authors argue that making quality services available to treat the treatable and prevent the preventable among children, remains a crucial target of advocacy in many settings. The authors reflect upon the deliberative exercise they have engaged in, which also challenges binary positions such as North/South since, as they say, their 'northness' and 'southness' is further blurred by the longstanding international engagement (through research, advocacy or clinical practice). In asking questions such as: what rehabilitation practice models may exist in Cameroon that could offer insight for Canadian providers? this led to a 'shared innovation' model where client-centred rehabilitation could be thought of together. Discussion of practices such as corporal punishment and its role in rehabilitation process became more dense and critical when juxtaposed with the history of forced labour in Cameroon which normalized physical punishment. The postcolonial context brought the illusion of more democracy and shared decision-making, but this approach has not been well supported in practice. These considerations prompt further reflection from the Canadian group on the role of institutional practices that normalize high amount of physical pain in rehabilitation processes of children. Are there shared ethical norms related to the use of pain during rehabilitation with children with disabilities that have worldwide applicability? The authors outline a pedagogical approach of deliberate, reflexive practice that is inclusive, grounded in practice (rather than 'high theory') and process-oriented, that indicates how there are key postcolonial implications of rehabilitation praxis for both contexts.

Burr writes about the experiences of visually and hearing impaired children in Vietnam demonstrating how cultural practices inform people's appraisal of disability. She highlights the particular context in post World War 2 Vietnam, whereby disabilities remain defined by a social, rather than a medical, understanding of the body, and persuasively argues that the calls for autonomous self-defining approaches circulating from the West/North presuppose levels of antidiscrimination legislation and practice that are not available in contexts such as Vietnam. Instead, she argues for the importance of first addressing local responses to disabilities, and then drawing upon local expertise when designing intervention programs, such as attempts to introduce a native sign language program. The paper points towards the

continual need to support grass roots based disability programs and highlights why it is so difficult to overcome feelings of punishment and guilt when the dominant discourse on disability is defined by traditional practice.

Corcoran offers glimpses into the lives of street children in Kenya through her interviews with primary school teachers and questions the one-size-fits-all model of interventions that emphasises both the disabling aspects of street-connectedness and that prioritizes the return of children to mainstream classrooms without critically examining the appropriateness of the move or the level of support given by the school to the child making the transition. Reflecting on the work of her partner organization, she tries to make sense of the observation that measures of well-being related to education, do not improve as quickly as other indicators in the year after children make the transition from the street. This is because, as she posits, the street connected child's capabilities have been hindered by the social/educational structure. Corcoran points to poor school experiences triggering students' disengagement and compelling them to go to the street. Importantly, she demonstrates that formal education systems can be as disabling- and certainly as disempowering- as being street-connected; especially given that children are moving from an existence of relative autonomy, to the constraints of a teacher-led classroom. She discusses the implications of street-connectedness and unreflexive teaching on the Kenyan primary education as well as on education policy.

Do Nascimento et al examine how experiences of children in poverty in Brazil are severely disabling in diverse ways. The ways in which the popular press and governmental discourses represented the actualities of existence, coded human life in the *favela* as inherently dangerous, precarious and marginal in their stories of Brazil's neoliberal aspirations to the world stage. The *favelas* and the people in them were depicted as a problem to be solved, a roadblock on the way to inclusion in the global capitalist economy. The authors stress that what is important to draw from this description of the overcoding of social relations is that capitalism operates as a system abstracted from lived experience and living capacity. The main problematic (or dilemma) that the authors bring out is the representation of those living in poverty as inherently socially and educationally deprived has spawned a minor industry of programs to assist and remediate the harsh living conditions of the *favela* giving rise also to the question of who is benefitting most from these.

In her article, Stienstra focuses on invisibility for indigenous girls and boys with disabilities living in Canada. She argues that disability/ableism works together with colonization and global capitalism to render disabled girls and boys invisible. When visible, they are only seen primarily as victims in communities of the global South found in Canada. She opens by suggesting that the emerging literature on disability and the global South has not paid sufficient attention to peripheral experiences of the global North, including the northern parts of Canada. These have constituted global South relations and positions, albeit within the global North. Her analysis focuses on the case of a child, Michael Charlie, who had to be hospitalized due to poor community resources that couldn't support and provide care for his muscular dystrophy. She links this to a similar case used to name a legal statute, Jordon's principle, to ensure provision of care of First Nations children. Stienstra highlights how these pockets of exclusion and invisibility only add insult to an injury afflicted by a history of colonization.

Vaidya explores the issue of sexual abuse of disabled children in the Indian context. Drawing on representations of child sexual abuse by charities and NGOs, and on the retrospective accounts of disabled adults that have been sexually abused as children, the author points to connections between the ways in which both disabled people and children are constructed as asexual and lacking in agency, a construction which denies them access to knowledge and resources, and makes them more vulnerable to abuse. Vaidya refuses to define disability or childhood in a regimented way and argues how the Indian context is constituted of and shaped by diverse and multiple childhoods, but globalization has had a universalizing effect on the urban Indian as well as policy level understandings of childhood. This leads her to understand disability as a combination of social, political and biological realities, whereby self-identification is relevant with regard to the persons whose subjective experiences have been documented.

Finally, Wolbring and Ghai argue that the ways in which scientific and technological developments influence, and are influenced by ability expectations and forms of ableism, are of particular importance for disabled people. One question they pose at the outset, concerns who shapes the discourses around the linkage between scientific and technological developments and ability expectations, especially in regard to children in general and disabled children in particular. While this question is addressed in relation to particular developments in India, it has clear and widespread relevance for any given country. Do scientific and technological products change the ability expectations we have of children in general and what we expect from children in schools? Do scientific and technological products impact how we perceive disabled children and how they perceive themselves? What does 'impaired' and 'disabled' mean when a man [sic] with no legs can run faster than most people in the world? At the same time, social robotics as a field is explored, and its role in assisting/empowering disabled is critically discussed. Social robotics narratives do not help to alleviate the stigma disabled children experience, and the authors push for a change in discourse in the field so that - people who read about social robots would be exposed to a less medical narrative about disabled people. The authors take these questions further to discuss current developments and claims made for neurocognitive stimulation. They argue that the new development of beyond species-typical neuro-cognitive abilities, raises key ethical-political as well as epistemological questions, especially for children in both the Global South and Global North. What will happen to children that do not fulfill the new 'enhanced' neuro-cognitive ability expectations? Will there be a new group of the non-enhanced disabled children who simply have no means to fulfill the new ability expectations?

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Notes

1. A notable exception is Singal and Muthukrishna (2014) who focus on education, disability and the global south.

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