



## Children's Studies: Beginnings and Purposes

Gertrud Lenzer

"The real question is whether it is still normal for a schoolchild to live for years amid irrational terrors and lunatic misunderstandings. And here one is up against the very great difficulty of knowing what a child really feels and thinks. A child which appears reasonably happy may actually be suffering horrors which it cannot or will not reveal. It lives in a sort of alien underwater world which we can only penetrate by memory or divination. Our chief clue is the fact that we were once children ourselves, and many people appear to forget the atmosphere of their own childhood almost entirely."

"Treacherous though memory is, it seems to me the chief means we have of discovering how a child's mind works."

"The child and the adult live in different worlds. "

George Orwell, "'Such, Such Were the Joys'"

It is a pleasure to introduce this special issue of *The Lion and the Unicorn* on Children's Studies and to provide a short history of Children's Studies. The new and interdisciplinary field of Children's Studies was founded in the autumn semester of 1991 at Brooklyn College of The City University of New York.<sup>1</sup> Two central observations led to its establishment.

First, most disciplines in the arts, humanities, social and medical sciences as well as law -- with the notable exceptions of children's literature, child psychology and pediatrics -- had failed to provide a special focus on children. In brief, most disciplines did not regard children as both a separate social class and human transhistorical condition. Childhood was conceived as a transitory stage on the way towards future adulthood. To the extent that children received any specialized attention, they had been subsumed under such different categories as education, the family, generational and life course studies, socialization, juvenile delinquency, deviant behavior and peer group

---

<sup>1</sup> The definition of "child" is taken from the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, article one, according to which a child is every human below the age of 18 or whenever legal majority occurs.

Faculty members who participated in the founding meeting were, in addition to the author, Geraldine De Luca and Roni Natov, English; Betty Wolder Levin, Health and Nutrition Sciences; Margaret King, History; Louise Hainline, Psychology; Laura Kitch, Sociology.

analysis. This general neglect of children and childhood as a distinct focus of analysis was even more remarkable when we consider the circumstance that the corporate sector had been well ahead of the academic disciplines. During recent decades, this sector discovered, singled out and “developed” children and young people as a separate new market, a new continent for capital expansion. Moreover, children have been used extensively by political parties, especially during periods of elections, to demonstrate their socially responsible intentions and for purposes of legitimation. Such child-rhetoric, however and as a rule, disappeared again after the elections. In other words, the increasing visibility of and concentration on children as a social class in the economic and political realms antedates, as it were, the “discovery” of children by the scholarly community.

It has only been during the last two decades, in particular, that an increasing number of disciplines in the arts and sciences have also begun to manifest an interest in children and youth. In the humanities, these growing subfields include children’s literature, history of childhood, and the philosophy of children. Among the social sciences, there are the newly emerging areas of the sociology of children in the United States. Other disciplines such as anthropology, political science, and economics have also produced, in rapidly increasing numbers, studies on child-related topics without, however, having established antecedently or concurrently a primary focus on children as a special branch of scholarly discourse and analysis within their special intellectual disciplines and organizations. In addition, with the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, which by now has been signed and ratified by 194 nation states (with the exception of the United States and Somalia), the field of children’s rights has been growing rapidly.

Second, the recent sharpening focus on children and youth in the humanities, social sciences, and international law represents a welcome development. But even as we first established the Sociology of Children as a new field and section within the American Sociological Association in 1991, it had become evident that the intellectual division of labor in children-related scholarship across the disciplines was largely adding new subspecialties of and within the disciplines themselves and that these studies were disconnected from one another. We felt that it was incumbent upon us to develop a holistic conceptualization of children as individuals and as a class, in order to overcome the disciplinary fragmentation of children into an incoherent manifold of specialized perspectives and to develop a commensurate and genuinely comprehensive perspective on and analysis of children.

With such realization also came the recognition that the disparate disciplinary undertakings in question – the findings, theories, and codes of assumption – needed to be complemented by a reconstruction or synthesis at another level of integration, for children are not fully characterized by psychological developmental processes, nor indeed by any single perspective. In our view, children also exist on their own as individuals, as a social and cultural class, and as a historical generation.

Hence, we cannot arrive at a comprehensive understanding of children by simply accumulating, aggregating, or adding up segmented findings from a far-flung variety of inquiries in the various disciplines. In response to the increasing fragmentation in child-research, Children's Studies was conceived as a genuinely interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary new field of study. Children's Studies represents an attempt to bring to bear knowledge from the different sectors of the arts and sciences on the conception of children as a class and to integrate this knowledge at an appropriate level of understanding and articulation. Children's Studies does not aim to achieve simply a sum of findings from diverse perspectives. By bringing carefully chosen knowledge of children from different studies to bear upon the class or category of children to students in a Liberal Arts course of learning, we hope that a more holistic understanding of children and childhood should emerge, which in the end will represent more than only the sum of its parts. In this conception, a child-- or children, for that matter -- does not consist of a multitude of disconnected propensities, interests, or realities as they appear to be refracted in a congeries of disconnected disciplinary pursuits. Instead, children and youth as human beings must be foregrounded both individually and as a class.

This is the aim of children's studies. It makes the ontological claim that children must be viewed in their fullness as human beings. The various child-focussed disciplinary endeavors must contribute to such a holistic understanding of children rather than reducing them to specialized abstract fragments which then in turn are hypostatized as representing 'the child,' 'children' or 'childhood. Such were among the ideas and methodological reflections which led to the conception of the interdisciplinary field of children's studies.

In the Children's Studies program at Brooklyn College of The City University of New York, courses include children's literature, the history of childhood, child development, sociology of children, children in education, child health, the African American child, the Puerto Rican child, as well as speech and language development. Other courses are in preparation for the near future such as a course on the rights of children. We also envision generic courses on children and the arts, children and the mass media, new technologies and the Internet, children and the environment, and children of the world, emphasizing cross-cultural and global perspectives in children.

The interdisciplinary capstone course, 'Perspectives on Children's Studies,' was developed by a faculty working group in weekly seminars during 1996 and 1997. When it was offered for the first time in the spring of 1997, the course was taught by six faculty members from the departments of History, English Literature, Film, Psychology, Sociology, and Public Health, along with two guest lecturers from the children's rights community. The unified, yet multi-disciplinary perspective is reflected in the five major units of the course itself.

*Unit One:* The Past and the Self with emphasis on childhood in pre-modern societies and the emergence of modern childhood.

*Unit Two:* The Child Imagining and Imagined. This segment includes the literary heritage, with readings from Blake, Wordsworth, Dickens; children's literature and its classic

themes; literature and art by children; picture books; and children and film.

*Unit Three:* The Developing Child with emphasis on the history and theories of child development as well as points of contact with other units of the course.

*Unit Four:* Children and Society, which includes an introduction to social perspectives on children and youth; children and social problems, both in the U.S. and on a global scale; issues in child health.

*Unit Five:* The Human Rights of Children: The International Agenda.

In this sense, the disciplines of the arts and sciences -- from the visual and performing arts, music, film, and literature, from philosophy to history, and from the many disciplines in the social sciences, medical science and legal studies -- are brought together to provide an individual focus on children and to bring about new understanding in the form of a series of new conceptualizations of children. From this perspective, the emerging rights of children, for example, are not conceived as a separate formal inquiry that confronts other studies dealing with children and youth. On the contrary, the human rights of children are regarded as an intrinsic component of all the disciplinary studies concerned with children.

It should be stressed that the overarching goal, intellectual ideal, and proposed methodology of the Children's Studies program in a liberal arts curriculum is to bring about among students more adequate, knowledge-based representations of children and youth in society by means of a new pedagogy and research methodology. At Brooklyn College, the Children's Studies Program is offered in the form of a minor. We conceive of it as a part of the general education of our students rather than a specialized field students should major in. We have found that the interests of our students in children and childhood is widespread and cuts across the fields they are majoring in.

But we also hope that these new perspectives on children will have wider social benefits as well. We envision that the Children's Studies program will also contribute to the well-being of children by promoting a knowledge-based and improved understanding among the educated public and in society at large of children's capacities, capabilities, needs and desires, as well as of their civil, political, economic and cultural human rights. By concentrating our efforts on creating an infrastructure of enlightened knowledge among our students, we envision a future in which the multi-disciplinary field of Children's Studies will play a significant role in promoting an enhanced understanding of children not only by reaching across the disciplines, but also by exposing students to knowledge that will deepen their understandings of children in their future roles as human beings and professionals in all walks of life and as citizens and parents.

For the time has passed when the specialized knowledge we derive from child research, scholarship and practice is available only to the experts. The time has also passed when individual citizens are simply left to depend upon unquestioned and unexamined conceptions about child development, child rearing, and indeed, the very experiences of children.

It is time that the privileged knowledge of the expert is shared with the so-called nonexpert. We hope that Children's Studies will contribute to changing public awareness in the sense that children are viewed as human subjects, not merely as objects of specialized scholarly research or of social policies and social action. And it is also for this reason that we hope other academic institutions will introduce Children's Studies in their curriculum.

I should like to end with George Orwell. His essay powerfully dramatizes our general condition: we know very little about the inner life of children, about their desires, aspirations or fears and sorrows, the imaginative creation of their own world and how the world of adults appears to the child. Children are indeed confronted with the considerable power the adult world has over them. Children cannot represent themselves, unlike other powerless groups who have made their claims heard. For most of what we know about children has been created by adults -- and as Orwell suggests -- adults who in most instances have forgotten what it was like to be a child. And so it is: much of our most intimate knowledge of children and childhood has traditionally come from writers, poets and artists and not from scholars, educators and policy makers. Perhaps Children's Studies can contribute to providing a voice to children and childhood which is commensurate with their reality and not exclusively a construction of adults.

**Gertrud Lenzer**

**Montauk, October 2000**