Reflections on the UNCRC's Future from a Transdisciplinary Bricoleur

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Abstract
The paper argues two main points. First, there remain vast untapped potentials for implementing children's rights within both present and coming generations, and second, that transdisciplinary theorising and local application can create and exploit such new opportunities. The paper begins with a theoretical analysis of the cross-cutting nature of the UNCRC, and its continued civilising impact as part of the globalised 'rights revolutions' reported by controversial Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker (2011: 378-481). I then move to a methodological reflection on how the treaty might be applied as a bricoleur in the lived experiences of children, families, caregivers and communities. The final section outlines a case study from the grape and wine industry located within the Niagara Region of Canada that applied these theoretical and methodological resources as a form of critical praxis in the lives of migrant agricultural workers temporarily employed there through the growing season year after year.

Keywords
transdisciplinarity; bricoleur; critical social pedagogy

Introduction
The paper opens with the assumption that the what and so what phases of implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child have been amply explored for decades now in academic and civil society publications throughout ‘world society’ (Luhmann, 1982: 131), and particularly in this one. The plethora of recommendations contained within the UN Committee’s burgeoning database of ‘Concluding Observations’ on domestic children’s rights reports provides additional evidence that the early implementation stages of the treaty have been accomplished. For those still interested in a fuller implementation and practice of children's rights in any location anywhere in the world, it’s always a half-full, and in the same moment, a half-empty glass. It’s always the best of times and the worst of times for children in many regions throughout the world, but the future of children’s human rights has yet to be fully determined.
As Prout (2001: 19) suggested over a decade ago, the future of childhood is now, though ‘[w]e live with the knowledge that modernity’s project of rational control has limits....The mood is more cautious and reflexive about the status of our understanding, more aware of the complexity of nature and society, more alert to the unintended consequences of our social actions and less sure of our social institutions’. Indeed, such complexities have wrought many new atrocities being committed in every region of the world to be flashed and seared immediately into one’s consciousness through various social and traditional media. The uncertainty unleashed by the flood of such images continues as the grim reminder that millions of young people are being dispossessed of even the most basic human rights simply to live and enjoy some form of healthy development. As one of many examples, portions of Syria and its population seethe and burn as I write (Botswana Gazette, 2012). In apparent support of a greater appreciation of the human right to healthy child development articulated in Articles 6 and 24 of the CRC, American environmental philosopher J. Baird Callicott made the following observations during a UNESCO conference in Paris (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2012a):

We humans are intimately connected – with every breath we take, every sip of liquid we drink, and every morsel of food we eat – to the surrounding bio-chemical-physical world. We are as vortices in a flux of energy and materials, distinguishable only as ephemeral structures in that flux. We cannot – that is, we should not – conceive of ourselves as in any way independent of the natural environment. Rather we are continuous with it. The protection of human health and well-being is indistinguishable from the protection of environmental health and well-being.

In line with Callicott’s analysis, in a brief chapter entitled Can We Save Our Civilization?, a second US-based environmentalist, Lester R. Brown, offers ten areas of grave planetary concern along with ten trends he argues are also cause for great optimism. These concerns and trends are listed below to illuminate and illustrate the similar dichotomous fault lines present in the children’s rights discourse.

The perennial dichotomy

Glass half-empty

1. Soil erosion and continent-sized dust storms visible from outer space.
2. Falling water tables from massive over-pumping of aquifers throughout the world.
4. Melting ice sheets with catastrophic flooding anticipated in low-lying areas particularly such as Vietnam and Bangladesh.
5. Shrinking mountain glaciers and the largest threat to food security in history.
6. Destruction of forests everywhere which are shrinking worldwide by 17 million acres per year.
7. Environmental and climate refugees by the advance of deserts.
8. Disappearing species resulting in the 6th largest period of extinction in geological time due to habitat destruction, climate change and pollution.
9. Spreading hunger due to rising food prices spiking to one billion in 2009 with population growth, grain used to fuel cars, and shortages in irrigation water.
10. Failing states – Brown lists North Korea, Sudan and Somalia heading a growing list and asks readers, how many can we tolerate before a failing civilization?

Glass Half-full

1. Wind power emerges as centrepiece of the new energy economy due to low-costs, abundance and endless capacity especially when compared to oil, gas and coal.
2. Solar power, due to increased production in the US, Japan, Germany – now China, Taiwan, the Philippines, and South Korea – doubles worldwide every two years.
3. Intensifying solar power which is one of the fastest growing sources of new energy due to its use of mirrors to concentrate sunlight – particularly in Northern African nations.
4. Energy from the earth through geothermal resources.
5. Lighting revolution through LEDs which could save enough energy to close 700 of the world’s 2700 coal-fired power plants.
6. Electrifying transportation as the 21st century world shifts to highbreds, all-electric and high-speed intercity rail.
7. Bicycles are back climbing from 94 million units in 2002 to 130 million in 2007.
8. Fish farming takes off (and while not without multiple detractors) one example is China’s aquacultural output at 31 million tonnes annually – double that of poultry.
9. India leads the world in milk production increasing five-fold since the 1970s.
Upon deeper reflection, Brown's list of 'half-empty' realities also appears counter-balanced by mounting empirical evidence of unprecedented decreases in child deaths worldwide in the past half-century (Rosling, 2006). It is quite clear now that diverse transdisciplinary theorists and empiricists are drawing upon ever longer historical trajectories to explain how human societies have become less violent, less brutal and physically and emotionally healthier. Harvard University's Steven Pinker (2011: 378-481) is one such controversial thinker who argues critically and convincingly that the 'rights revolutions' in the latter portion of the 20th century have played a pivotal role in this transformation. In a massively supported counterintuitive thesis, this professor of evolutionary psychology concludes that violence throughout the regions of the world is declining dramatically – much of it due to the promotion and recognition of woman's human rights. He attempts to reconcile this through historical and psychological evidence that identify 'exogenous forces that favour our peaceable motives and that have driven the multiple declines' in interpersonal and societal violence across myriad cultures. A key plank in his platform is how 'efforts to stigmatize, and in many cases criminalize, temptations to violence have been advanced in a cascade of campaigns for “rights” – civil rights, women’s rights, children’s rights, gay rights, and animal rights' (ibid.: 380).

In response to this perennial ‘half-empty half-full’ dichotomy, the paper emerges from reflections on two decades as a children's practitioner in British Columbia across the range of 'service provision systems' typical in industrialised states (Moss and Petrie, 2002: 2). I have now added an additional decade as a university-based researcher, educator, and author – all of it framed by the CRC's principles and provisions. From both sides of the perennial debate, I offer a relatively innovative theoretical analysis as a means of creating new momentum. These come not from any kind of modernist or prescriptive notion of that concept, but from the sense that various slaughters, manifold indignities, and execrable discriminatory practices aimed at children, particularly against many girls, and visited daily upon millions, could still be shifted, perhaps are shifting, as we speak. So very often it is difficult to step back from one's own historical, political and cultural location to evaluate whether the UNCRC has made a lasting difference, and perhaps more importantly, to consider if there are additional contributions to healthy human development yet to be made by knowing and implementing this treaty. As noted global thinker Jeffrey Sachs (2008) has observed, 'the old models of statecraft have ceased to work' (in Crone, 2013: 45), and this basic assertion is as good an entry point for re-thinking and re-applying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as any I have lately heard.

As an effort to gain such perspective, I present and argue two main points. First, I’m convinced there remain vast untapped potentials for implementing
the human rights of children within present and coming generations, and secondly, a critical transdisciplinary understanding of the treaty can better exploit these opportunities. I further assume that the now what phase of the UNCRC is still largely unwritten. The following sections argue for the continued re-theorising of the Treaty along with a more effective holistic application or through its constituent, interdependent sections, in the lived experiences of children. It closes with a case study from the Niagara grape and wine region of Canada that has applied and illustrates these contentions.

Transdisciplinarity, the Bricoleur and the UNCRC

While developmental psychologist Jean Piaget is widely credited with coining the term in 1970, the definition underpinning this section builds primarily upon Basarab Nicolescu’s elucidation within his Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity (2002: 1). He observes that the term ‘retains a certain pristine charm, mostly because it has not yet been corrupted by time’, but that time may be drawing nigh. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the institutionalisation of transdisciplinarity within universities also has UN antecedents beginning in 1987 through the creation of the International Centre of Transdisciplinary Research and Studies. In 1995, Romanian quantum physicist Basarab Nicolescu co-founded the Reflection Group on Transdisciplinarity with UNESCO – a project initially involving 16 scientific and cultural personalities in the implementation of transdisciplinary methodologies in various fields of international research. One of its main aims is the implementation of these principles in education, and slowly but decisively, transdisciplinarity has gained an international impact, especially in superior educational settings, as universities from all over the world have opened themselves to experimenting with transdisciplinary curricula, research activities, and conferences (Dincă, 2011).

We can readily observe how various discourses of childhood have also attempted to explain the international trajectory of the UNCRC, and while not without contention, these have allowed historical notions of the ‘rights of children’ to lay a genuine claim to maturity in recent decades. British educators Moss and Petrie (2002: 81) remind us that such ‘policy texts are sites of power’, and are aiding in establishing new narrative conventions and repertoires of interpretation for argumentation and communication. These sites confer power on preferred modes of speaking and judging along with certain ways of expressing moral and political subjectivity (citing Dutch feminist Selma Sevenhuijsen, 1999). Nevertheless, a pervasive type of disciplinary myopia may be observed enveloping service delivery systems in both minority and majority world settings (Moore and Mitchell, 2008, 2009), and this silo-thinking frequently results in ineffective, even lethal outcomes for children (see Report
of the Gove Inquiry into Child Protection, 1995). The challenge for those attempting to apply the treaty as a vehicle to extinguish odious forms of discrimination, or to leverage greater freedom from physical and sexual abuse of children, is to think and operate beyond traditional disciplines like education, law or juvenile justice, psychology, sociology, health, child welfare, or politics. In this way, innovative ways of using treaty principles as methodological tools for interrogating new areas of concern may take one well beyond these socially and politically constructed boundaries.

Freeman (2007) notes the liberation of women and children, soldiers and prisoners from the violence of physical punishment and abusive discipline throughout the 20th century, is still underway in most corners of the world. It is now a cliché to observe how epochal shifts continue to re-position 21st century children, particularly in terms of their global rights to health and wellbeing. It is also abundantly clear that multi- and even interdisciplinary approaches to understanding the UNCRC are inadequate to conceptualise the proliferation of new childhood knowledges exploding across geo-political and pedagogical structures. While such processes play a role in the gradual transformation of human societies and remain a key focus for those promoting the treaty since early days, the child rights ‘movement’ clearly has much unfinished business.

The most critical problems humanity faces today are complex problems, observe Apgar, Argumedo, and Allen (2009: 255), and similar to Prout’s analysis (2001), they contend these times are ‘characterized by high levels of uncertainty, multiple perspectives and multiple interlinked processes from local to global scales’. As highlighted in previous work (Moore and Mitchell, 2008, 2011; Mitchell and Moore, 2012), these epistemological and methodological shifts can be aimed at resolving such dilemmas, and are increasingly being mirrored in academic literature of the social sciences, humanities, healthcare, and scientific journals under the rubric of ‘transdisciplinarity’ (see Russell, 2000; Koizumi, 2001; Nicolescu, 2002; Giroux and Searls Giroux, 2004; Holmes and Gastaldo, 2004; Robinson, 2008; Mitchell, 2010). In an exhaustive review of the range of this discourse, two Canadian health scientists note this definition:

Transdisciplinarity integrates the natural, social and health sciences in a humanities context, and transcends their traditional boundaries. The objectives of multiple disciplinary approaches are to resolve real world or complex problems, to provide different perspectives on problems, to create comprehensive research questions, to develop consensual clinical definitions and guidelines, and to provide comprehensive health services. Multiple disciplinary teamwork has both benefits and drawbacks. (Choi and Pak, 2006: 351)

These authors further note its holistic typologies and refer to the three terms as involving any application of multiple disciplines to varying degrees on the
same continuum. The common words for multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary are additive, interactive, and holistic, they observe respectively. This type of transdisciplinarity is inherently critical, and is being argued contemporaneously within many traditional discourses. I am suggesting here that appreciating the UNCRC in such a fashion could open up new ways from the entrenched ‘tower of babble’ where young people’s human rights are so often absorbed (Moore and Mitchell, 2009: 30). Arguing in a similar vein, Freirean critical pedagogues Giroux and Searls-Giroux (2004: 102) observe:

[T]he cultural studies emphasis on transdisciplinary work provides a rationale for challenging how knowledge has been historically produced, hierarchically ordered, and used within disciplines to sanction particular forms of authority and exclusion. Transdisciplinary work often operates at the frontiers of knowledge, and prompts teachers and students to raise new questions and develop models of analysis outside the officially sanctioned boundaries of knowledge and the established disciplines that control them.

Such approaches, they argue, stress both historical relations and broader social formations ‘while remaining attentive to new linkages, meanings, and possibilities’. While educators may be forced to work within academic silos, ‘they can develop transdisciplinary tools to challenge the limits of established fields and context the broader economic, political, and cultural conditions that reproduce unequal relations of power’, they contend (ibid.). Taking this fresh approach to re-considering the UNCRC offers just such a set of tools. Without essentialising here, I consider that anyone in any sector interested in greater application of the UNCRC’s core principles who re-theorises the treaty in this way could continue the gradual transformation towards survival and more civilized behaviours towards children noted by Rosling (2006), Pinker (2010), and others. Notwithstanding the tentativeness of postmodern childhoods, the human rights glass then appears ‘half-full’.

While attempting to apply treaty principles in numerous social science investigations with young people, I have also found the epistemological and methodological descriptions of the bricoleur articulated by US critical pedagogue Joe Kincheloe to be valuable in stretching across and outside of disciplinary boundaries. In his text on Knowledge and Critical Pedagogy, Kincheloe emphasises that ‘we live in an era of disinformation – self-interested data distributed by those with the most power and resources’ (2010: vii). ‘Critical pedagogy’, he emphasises, (ibid.: 8-9) ‘is a complex notion that asks much of educators and students who embrace it ... critical knowledge seeks to connect with the corporeal and the emotional in a way that understands at multiple levels and seeks to assuage human suffering’. He contends ‘[c]ritical educational knowledge emerges neither from subjects nor from objects but from a dialectical relationship between the knower (subject) and the known (object)’
Similar to Albrecht, Freeman and Higginbotham (1999), Kincheloe and McLaren (2005: 316) note that in efforts to ‘expose the various structures that covertly shape our own and other scholars’ research narratives, the bricolage highlights the relationship between a researcher’s ways of seeing and the social location of his or her personal history’. This allows for the development of new epistemological and political tools, and new ways of seeing how to apply older ones.

In this context, bricoleurs move into the domain of complexity. The bricolage exists out of respect for the complexity of the lived world and the complication of power. Indeed, it is grounded on an epistemology of complexity. One dimension of this complexity can be illustrated by the relationship between research and the domain of social theory. (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005: 317)

They further maintain when one appreciates ‘research as a power-driven act, the critical researcher-as-bricoleur abandons the quest for some naïve concept of realism, focusing instead on the clarification of his or her position in the web of reality...’ (ibid.: 316).

In her review of Kincheloe’s analysis of this concept, qualitative researcher and internationally renowned scholar Yvonna Lincoln contends:

[The] bricoleur is far more skilled than merely a handyman [as its definition implies]. This bricoleur looks for not yet imagined tools, fashioning them with not yet imagined connections. This handyman is searching for the nexuses, the linkages, the interconnections, the fragile bonds between disciplines, between nodes of knowledge, between knowing and understanding...it is ‘boundary-work’ taken beyond the extreme, boundary-work beyond race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class. (Lincoln, et al., 2001: 693-94)

In the same review, critical theorist (and frequent co-author of the now deceased Kincheloe), Peter McLaren argues that ‘Joe’s quest for transdisciplinary rigor in the spirit of his ongoing concern with working class struggle, social transformation, and social injustice in contemporary capitalist society’ might preclude the inherent danger ‘of the bricoleur in the thrill of deep interdisciplinarity lapsing into a form of epistemological relativism’ (Lincoln, et al., 2001: 710).

In a sustained effort to avoid a similar fate, I offer the following case study recounting the early stages of a post-secondary scholarship offered to the children of migrant agricultural workers in the prosperous Niagara wine and grape region of Canada wherein I played a pivotal role. While no longer a project for children since the recipient turned eighteen years of age before the award was made, the initiative drew upon the theoretical and methodological resources outlined in the previous sections. Its success also opens up new possibilities for future children from a marginalised and globally shifting community to draw a return on the investment of labour by their absentee parents.
Praxis and the Niagara Migrant Children’s Educational Award

Praxis is the Greek term commonly adopted by critical pedagogues, and is defined as an activity that combines theorising with practice, thought with action, for emancipatory purposes. I adopted this stance in 2010 after being approached by an advocacy group for agricultural workers: Dignidad Obrera Agriculturale Migrante (Dignity for Migrant Agricultural Workers). This group is composed of members from the growing labour force of over 5,000 that visit the fertile Niagara Region greenhouse, fruit growing, and wine producing industries each year in south-western Ontario, Canada. They had numerous requests that would be characterised under the academic rubric ‘greater social inclusion’, one of which was to assist them in developing a scholarship for members of their families. Many of these men (mostly) and women (increasingly) return to the region year after year for eight to ten months under Canada’s Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (or SAWP, 2012) which is run by the federal government with help from authorities in Mexico, Venezuela, the Philippines, and Jamaica among others, mainly in rural areas faced with extreme levels of poverty and chronically high unemployment. During absences, their children are billeted with relatives or cared for by older siblings while their fathers and mothers labour long, arduous hours for what would be subsistence wages in this country, and thus, for which no labour force can be mobilised. To many of these workers, their remuneration is at reasonable enough rates that mean the difference between a family falling apart due to poverty, hunger, stress – or not. For many, the exploitation, uncertainty and conditions of employment are found to be egregious (for example Justice for Migrant Workers, 2012). In the brief but powerful edited text 15 Disturbing Things We Need to Know, US-based sociologist James A. Crone includes a chapter describing the growing phenomena of nannies, maids, and sex workers being imported into industrialised economies of the world as ‘Global Woman’ (2013: 21). ‘Women from poor, developing countries are migrating to developed nations to work as maids and nannies to raise other people’s children but are not able to raise their own children back in their own countries’, report Ehrenreich and Russell Hochschild (ibid.). To their list, I would add women employed as migrant agricultural workers who also travel throughout world society to labour in the planting, tending and harvesting of the human food chain.

As one familiar with many of the children living in poverty in a wealthy industrialised nation such as Canada I took up the role of a transdisciplinary bricoleur in response to this Niagara advocacy group. Initially, a faculty colleague and I met with our local mayor and requested his partnership which quickly grew to include officials from a regional college and a philanthropic foundation both interested in supporting the initiative. This small network
approached senior administrative colleagues at my own university each of whom offered substantial in-kind support by waiving tuition and some additional fees for award recipients. Part-time employment was offered by the university’s student union representatives (Brock News, 2012a). The next challenge was to locate a young person from amongst the children of the seasonal community of labourers as an appropriate first candidate. A young woman whose father had been stricken with a health crisis came to our attention (This Magazine, 2006). Fast-forward to the summer of 2012, and the story gained national coverage in Canada’s largest newspaper (D’Alesio, 2012). A university press release next recounted how Ms. Sayuri Gutierrez, her father an agricultural worker from Mexico employed in the region, was hard-pressed to figure out how she or her family could ever afford a university education. She accepted the Migrant Children’s Educational Award (2012), the only university-based stipend of its kind in Canada, as its first recipient. Gutierrez is also the first in her family from either side to attend post-secondary education. ‘I feel proud because I’m the daughter of a migrant worker,’ she stated. ‘The son or daughter of a migrant worker studying in Canada, it sounds impossible when you’re in your home country’ (Brock News, 2012b).

The award also offered a type of reciprocity for the University community to put into practice the theoretical principles of sustainability (Mitchell, May, Purdy and Vella, 2011; Brock News, 2012a) by applying the widely referenced definition from the 1987 Bruntland Commission for this ambiguous term (UN Economic Commission for Europe, 2012). Simply stated, present generations are compelled to leave enough of the earth’s resources for the use of all future generations. Since the campus is one of a small cadre of Canadian universities located in a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve (UNESCO, 2012b), their framework provided the University a compelling opportunity to practise sustainability through intersecting lenses of science, education and culture. Perhaps unsurprisingly, such approaches were also in line with the University’s strategic plans for transdisciplinary initiatives. I was quoted in one press release as follows:

‘But it’s not just the physical environment that needs to be protected and cared for’, Mitchell notes. ‘To try and understand sustainability without looking at the people who are working on the land doesn’t work,’ he says when explaining the award’s creation. ‘It’s these kinds of intersections between and amongst education, science, and culture that brought me to notice the migrant agricultural workers in the Niagara Region. They bring so much prosperity for all of us and yet their experiences are often that of social exclusion, marginalization and even discrimination’. (Brock News, 2012b)

Ms. Gutierrez ably attests to these circumstances since she and her family were on the verge of being deported from Canada, but were granted residency on compassionate grounds quite possibly due to the national newspaper
coverage on the award (D’Alesio, 2012). Her father also suffers from kidney disease and would be unable to afford life-saving treatment in Mexico (see Auld’s analysis of migrant health issues, 2011). ‘My family had gone through so many things,’ she says. ‘I saw how a psychologist was working with my brother when he had his traumas. My mother was going into depression. One day, I thought being in psychology would be a good idea to help people that have family issues or children who go through hard times.’ Ms. Gutierrez said receiving the scholarship was like ‘winning the lottery,’ ensuring her and her family’s future (Brock News, 2012b).

Conclusions

The perennial dichotomy for the children’s rights ‘movement’ still remains and the Canadian case study above from Niagara’s grape and wine region illustrates how drawing upon new theoretical and methodological tools creates new opportunities to take UNCRC principles and provisions forward. Globalisation continues unabated in much the same kind of dichotomous relationship across nations and cultures, but the paper has argued there are innumerable ways remaining to tap into treaty potentials in order to benefit real people’s lives at the same time as breathing life into its texts. The transdisciplinary bricoleur argued for by Giroux and Searls-Giroux (2004), Kincheloe (2010), and Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) among others, allows a contemporary theoretical analysis of the treaty to be taken into academic, governmental and non-governmental sites. While it will always appear the best of times and the worst of times for children in all corners of the world, the future of the UNCRC will always be now.

References


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