THE USE OF MULTIMEDIA IN THE CHILDWATCH INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH NETWORK

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Abstract: The article describes the background and the activities in the Childwatch International research network in using electronic communication. The network has a core of 30 institutions world-wide that work together to establish Childwatch International as a tool for international cooperation and for mutual support in capacity enhancing within child research.

One of the main objectives of Childwatch is to develop overviews of the activities of central research institutions within child research and to facilitate the flow of information between the institutions. The information strategy of Childwatch has explicitly aimed at taking advantage of the opportunities represented by modern electronic communication technology.

Childwatch launched the idea of establishing Children's House in Cyberspace. Which is an electronic meeting place for those working for and with children at the professional level, whether within research, programming, planning, advocacy, legislation or policy-making.

Network of Institutions

Childwatch International is a global not for profit network of institutions involved in research for children. The aim of the network is to initiate and coordinate research and information projects on children's living conditions and the implementation of children's rights.

The research network has a core of 30 institutions world-wide that work together to develop Childwatch International as a tool for their international cooperation and for mutual support in capacity enhancing within child research.

Childwatch International emerged in 1993 from a process of informal consultations among child researchers from different parts of the world. With a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and thematic interests they represented a broad spectrum of academic and research institutions. They wanted a good overview of relevant research activities and they wanted to exchange information and initiate new projects in areas of common concern.

Globalization, Children's Rights and International Cooperation

The increased globalization of economies and of politics has lead to a globalization of childhood which inspired to a wish for regular contact and collaboration among the researchers initiating the network. The globalization represents new challenges in child research and just as many aspects of childhood are similar around the word, there are also significant regional and structural differences that need to be studied.

Another concern shared by the researchers was the possible implications of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on their research. The Convention on the Rights of the Child provide a common platform for discussing how research could benefit children and support the implementation of the Convention. The Convention and the child rights movement bring a new language and terms of reference for those who work with and for children, as well as new obligations and challenges for governments.

The increased globalization and the Convention on the Rights of the Child represent major opportunities for the research community to look at new issues relating to children, for identifying gaps in knowledge, to match the international and regional developments with adequate data. These perspective also provide new opportunities for collaboration.

A new research approach is necessary to get the relevant understanding of children and the environment they grow up in. This process needs to be interdisciplinary, and has been given, by professor Noboru Kabayashi the Japanese term KODOMOGAKU.

Kodomogaku-Childwatch Objectives

Kodomogaku calls for interdisciplinary and broad based study of children. This approach is also reflected in Childwatch International objectives:

- To promote an inter-disciplinary approach to child research and a holistic understanding of children;

- To promote effective dissemination of the results from child research to the general public;

- To encourage and support a dialogue between researchers and desicision-markers on the development of strategies for the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international agreements concerning child welfare;

- To identify new issues to be included in the global agenda for child research and initiate projects to address them.

- To support capacity building and capacity strengthening within the field of child research, particularly with partners in countries in the South.

Implementation of Objectives

Childwatch International has explored a variety of ways to promote the network and to gain experience and has initiated important activities:

- Research projects, such as Indicators for Children's Rights: an effort to identify already existing data to use in monitoring implementation of the Convention and test its applicability in some selected countries;

- Identifying new research areas or defining new approaches to old ones, such as: Children and Environment; Child labor and child work; Street children;

- Facilitating and assisting activities to develop and strengthen research agenda and capacity in areas relevant to children's development and well being;

- Taking advantage of the internet and other electronic communication tools, to develop effective information exchange and interaction between researchers and research institutions, and to facilitate information on ongoing child research.

Taking Advantage of New Information Technology

Since its inception, one of the main objectives of Childwatch has been to develop overviews of the activities of central research institutions with child research and to facilitate the flow of information between the institutions. The information strategy of Childwatch has explicitly aimed at taking advantage of the opportunities represented by modern electronic communication technology.

Many of Childwatch's partners are now using e-mail as their main mode of communication within the network, both in individual communication and in communication within groups (m-lists). Childwatch has taken an active role in promoting the use of the internet to present and seek information, and several Key Institutions now have their own home pages. Childwatch has hosted a seminar for Key Institutions IT-representatives for mutual learning and increased skills in using the internet for research purposes. Childwatch is aware of the uneven distribution of and access to the internet and has assisted in improved access to the communication opportunities.

The internet also provide the opportunity to do research on-line. An example of that is establishment of directories such as the European Directory of Child Research Institutions. To do research online requires new methods and severe consideration on how to develop and present solid and valid data and research.

A natural part of using the opportunities represented by the internet, Childwatch launched the idea of establishing Children's House in Cyberspace. The idea is to create an electronic meeting place for those working for and with children at the professional level, whether within research, programming, planning, advocacy, legislation or policy-making. This initiative has been met with overwhelming and positive responses from organizations and institutions who want to place their information in Children's House, or who want to establish links to their own databases.

Children's House in Cyberspace

Together with Key Institutions and other organizations involved in children's issues, particulary within programming, Childwatch has established Children's

House in Cyberspace, an electronic meeting place where professionals can exchange information that serves the well-being of children, and translate the benefits of research and programming into policy and practice.

Through the World Wide Web, reliable information regarding ongoing research activities, programming, international events, electronic conferences and interactive databases can be accessed. Children's House aims at serving as an instrument for dialogue, discussion and dissemination of knowledge on the situation of children.

The goals of Children's House in Cyberspace is not just dissemination of information but also the active communication and exchange of views.

The House was launched in 1996 and has an increasing number of users. In 1997 there were 400,000 visits to Children's House.

Children's House in Cyberspace is structured along subject matters or themes and each theme presented at the Internet is managed by a Moderator, with experience in the theme. The group of Moderators constitutes the House Committee, which makes decisions on developments and adjustments of the organization of the House. You can find Children's House in Cyberspace at http://childhouse.uio.no.

New Themes On the Global Research Agenda

Childwatch is interested in exploring the opportunities represented by the internet for advancing research. This is done through support to global projects based on collaboration between different research institutions an example on how the internet is used in a research project is the Growing up in Cities project, supported by UNESCO and Childwatch International. The project is described in a separate paragraph below.

Another example of a global research agenda is to organize the Childwatch, Research and Activity Teams, so-called ReAcTs. Research and Activity Teams are reflecting a mode of collaboration and involvement of Childwatch Key Institutions in common research projects, that take the that reflect the added value advantage of the combined and coordinated sources of knowledge and capacity represented by the Key Institutions and individual partners in the research network. Through a process of consultation in the network themes for ReAcTs are formulated and initiated. A recent ReAcT is the significance of political and economic transformation in the everyday lives of children.

The theme augmented childhood in a multimedia environment represents an excellent opportunity for Childwatch International research network to take part in the process of capturing and formulating new terms for the research agenda.

The conference augmented childhood: The evolution of child development in the multimedia environment has fueled the interest at Childwatch for initiating research in this area and recently Childwatch made a proposal for a new ReAcT: The impact of media and information technology on the lives of children. Within the research community as well as in media and the general public there is an emerging discussion on what multimedia and information technology mean for children. Particularly the following issues feature frequently:

- positive aspects; for learning, personal development
- negative aspects; reinforced culture of violence, sedentary childhood
- variations in access to such media and to the technology
- increasing gaps between rich and poor countries.

Growing up in Cities

The Growing up in Cities project is a historical, international and interdisciplinary and participatory action research project based on children's rights and using electronic communication in the project development.

In the Growing up in Cities project the internet is actively used as a working tool between the researchers. Throughout m-lists researchers communicate about methods and the Internet is used for exchanging information between the researchers, the children involved and as a way of reporting as the research project develops.

The project is a replication of a study in the UNESCO project Man and Biosphere program. The Architect Kevin Lynch, conducted a study in the 1970s on children in 5 cities around the world by making surveys and mapping and observing the neighborhoods and the children's use of the neighborhoods. Kevin Lynch and his research associates interviewed the children and adults in the chosen neighborhoods of the city. In 1995 a plan for replicating the study was adopted and today the project goes on in cities, of which 3 are the original sites.

The project compares children's perceptions with parents and other adults experience and view, for example municipal and official representatives. These interviews helps in getting a picture on how the environments effects children's lives. For the three historic sites a comparison on changes over time will be carried out.

Method used: photo-mapping of area; observation of children's use of their environment;

Interviews with children about:

a) Their perception of community and environment;
b) Their priorities for change and improvement in their neighborhoods.

The historical and dimension of the project allows for analyses of comparison: How are changing global economic and social forces affecting the environment of urban childhood?

In the replication of the study an important dimension has been added to the original project: The rights of the child and children's participation. The researchers are talking with, listening to and respecting children's and young peoples views and perspectives on their own situation and neighborhoods and community. The researchers work actively with the children and accept and promote children as actors and partners in changing and affecting their environment.

The general basis for the project is participatory action research methods, but the project allows for various methods to be used. The researchers are involving the children and young people in evaluating and discussing their community environment, developing strategies and proposals for improving the environment, and in building partnerships in doing this. These methods bring to the children education for action, learning life skills, gaining self-confidence, developing social and environmental responsibility and developing capacity for democratic action.

The research teams at the sites/neighborhoods are linked through electronic mail, but also cooperate in reality. The eight research teams have met on several occasions to develop the foundation, an update of the Kevin Lynch approach and to prepare the project and agree on terms for reporting. The researchers uses each other creatively and actively: they are continuously discussing and assessing the development of the project and are putting questions and observations out through the e-mail. Some sites have developed web-sites, and use them to put out current information and requests for feed-back.

Children's drawings and photos appear on the web pages. The children are becoming interested in the lives and situation of the other children involved.

The children have expressed a wish to communicate with the children at the other sites, see their drawings, hear about their proposals. The language barrier has to be overcome and the researchers struggle to get the children to connect.

The perspectives of the Growing up in Cities project are multiple:

The project is an example of implementation of children's rights, with a strong component on environmental action the project has links to the Habitat and Agenda 21 perspectives, and to the UNICEF Child-friendly cities in the electronic communication and children are learning through action, learning life skills, democracy and responsibility.

More detailed information about Childwatch International is available at the Internet: http://childhouse.uio.no/childwatch/

Cities in the growing up in Cities project. Cities underlined are historic sites.
Argentina: Salta, Buenos Aires, Australia: Melbourne, India: Bangalore, Norway: Trondheim, Poland: Warzaw, South Africa: Johannesburg, United Kingdom: Northampton, United States: Oakland, California.