Living in the present while imagining the future: How school and its promises shape conceptions of childhood for indigenous tribal students in India

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Abstract
This article builds on Allison James and Alan Prout's call to focus more on theorizing the social construction of time in childhood and explores how school, as an organization and an experience, influences students' conceptions of childhood and experiences of being a child. Extending the conception of time of childhood to include their future projections, we assert that aspiring to become an adult, while seeming to diminish the experience of childhood, actually provides motivation and hope to children. We also posit that school's emphasis on "preparation to become" influences children's experience in school and "imagined futures" as adults. The article is based on interviews with Indian tribal students between the ages of 9 and 15 who attended school at a residential school serving 25,000 students and at government day schools in Odisha, India.

Keywords
Temporality, India, schooling, childhood, adulthood

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> I am an adult. I know how to give respect to others. I also know how to give love and affection to younger kids. For instance, when the small kids behave in the wrong manner, I ask them not to do so.
>
> Sunita,[1] 14 years old, Kalinga Institute of Social Science, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

By most Western measures of adulthood, Sunita would not be considered an adult. She is only 14 years old and a full-time student. However, her conceptualization of the transition from childhood to adulthood upends most temporal distinctions between childhood and adulthood; she does not use age to mark the transition out of childhood nor does she associate being a student with being a child. Her statement reflects a fluid conceptualization of self that accommodates future roles, responsibilities, and actions within her present self-identification. This article explores students' conceptualizations of the temporal nature of childhood within the social space of school. It is based on interviews with tribal[2] students between the ages of 9 and 15 who attended school at the Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS, 2015), a residential school, and at several government day schools located in tribal villages in Odisha, India. KISS is a unique residential school in its size (25,000 students), student composition (serving students from age 6 to 22 from 62 tribal groups), funding source (students pay no fees because all expenses are covered by profits from its sister institution, the Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology), and the role of its charismatic founder in shaping its school culture. The day schools are all government-run upper primary schools located in relatively remote tribal villages.

Theoretical framework

Allison James et al. (1998) in their seminal book, *Theorizing Childhood*, designate temporal space and social space as critical areas for honing theories of childhood; in fact they describe space and time as "metatheoretical dimensions" critical in shaping human cognition and identity (p. 34). In this article, we focus on both these spaces as experienced by Indian tribal students. Based on students' conceptualization of childhood and adulthood, we propose broadening the temporal context to include their hopes and aspirations for the future. In terms of social space, we focus exclusively on school as a social space emphasizing how schools, with their focus on preparing for the future, influence the conceptualization and experience of childhood.

Temporal space

Time in and of childhood. Sociological and anthropological studies of childhood have upended notions of a single "normal" human developmental process. Sociologists (e.g. James et al., 1998; James and Prout, 2015; Lareau, 2003) and anthropologists (e.g. Anderson-Levitt, 2005; Lancy, 2008; Montgomery, 2009) demonstrate that humans mature in biologically predictably ways but that life transitions, and resulting lifespan categories, are experienced and marked according to different social and cultural expectations. This becomes clear when "time *in* childhood," the period in the human lifespan designated as childhood, and time *of* childhood, how time is experienced by children, are examined across cultural and social groups (James et al., 1998; James and Prout, 2015). Despite several decades developing a multidisciplinary approach to childhood studies and extensive research on myriad aspects of childhood, temporality and transition points still need more attention. Allison James and Alan Prout (2015) point out that "The social construction of time in and through social relationships is a relatively neglected theoretical theme within contemporary sociology" (p. 202) and one that is especially socially significant for understanding childhood.

Much of the research on the sociology of childhood emphasizes how childhood is denigrated and marginalized in most societies because it is seen only as a transition or preparation for adulthood. Although we agree that conceptualizations of children as "human becomings," "protoadults," "not-yet-persons," or "future-beings" (e.g. Bardy, 1994; Hungerland, 1999; James and Prout, 2015) are demeaning and belittling, we posit that a healthy conceptualization of childhood in its own right can still recognize the attraction of a future identity on present identity. Children who look toward adulthood in shaping their self-image do not diminish their childhood; rather, they are projecting and imagining a future as a part of their present. As described below, a growing number of sociologists and anthropologists are examining the future in connection to culture and self-concept. We propose that an imagined or projected future as an adult motivates culturally and morally appropriate actions for children in the present (Frye, 2012; Vaisey, 2009) and provides hope to aspire to a good life (Appadurai, 2013; Miyazaki, 2004).

Projected or imagined futures. A growing number of anthropologists (e.g. Appadurai, 2013; Miyazaki, 2004) and sociologists (e.g. Frye, 2012; Hitlin and Elder, 2007; Mische, 2009; Vaisey, 2009) are calling for more focus on temporality, specifically projectivity, in understanding people's present actions within their cultural context. Much of this work, building on pragmatist philosophy, emphasizes how the future serves as motivation for present actions.

Within anthropology, Arjun Appadurai (2013) calls for "an anthropology of the future" (p. 3) in order to move away from "concerns with persistence, stability, and fixity in the cosmologies of different societies" (p. 5). When culture is viewed as extending into the future, we can better see how individuals project culturally valid future identities into their present self-identification. Looking to the future requires developing a "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai, 2013). Hirokazu Miyazaki (2004) also advocates for including the future in conceptions of culture. In his research in Fiji, he found that even rituals, usually viewed as traditional and tied to the past, are actually powerful only in their promise of future, prospective gain.

A number of sociologists are also examining projectivity in present identifications. For example, Ann Mische (2009) calls for sociologists to pay attention to how people use "projected futures" to guide present actions. Margaret Frye (2012) makes a similar appeal to examine "imagined futures" in order to underscore the moral imperative behind seemingly irrational decisions. Steven Hitlin and Glen H Elder (2007) call for a reconceptualization of "agency" to include more attention to the future, especially related to life course agency. Steven Vaisey (2009) writes that when culture is seen as connected to the past, it serves to *justify* current actions, but when it is seen as connected to the future, it serves as to *motivate* actions.

Social space

Influence of schools and schooling on concepts of childhood. The social space of school affects the concept of childhood by universalizing a space separate from home and community, setting a biological age as a transition point (Anderson-Levitt, 2003, 2005; James and Prout, 2015), and projecting a link between education and a bright future. As with conceptions of childhood, sociologists and anthropologists have deconstructed concepts of school and of what it means to be a student. They argue that the commonalities found at the international and national level are little more than a shell in which local beliefs and values, social structures, and traditional ways of learning play out (Anderson-Levitt, 2003, 2005). In addition to sharing a teacher-centered mode of instruction (lecture, recitation, and seat-work), a co-educational setting, and a division of students by age, schools around the world hold up education as the route to a good future (Cregan and Cuthbert, 2014; Frye, 2012). School also affects children's self-identification; being a student describes not only a

current status—someone who goes to school—but also future aspirations. The label "student" also carries connotations of superior social standing and behavior often associated with the attainment of adulthood (e.g. increased knowledge, self-restraint, and social skills) even when students know its promised results are illusive (Bolten, 2015; Frye, 2012).

Schooling for Indian tribal children. This article examines students' conceptualization of the transition from childhood to adulthood in the context of two very different educational settings. For the students attending local day schools, the promise of a better future through education rarely materializes because of the poor quality of rural government schools.[3] KISS, in contrast, provides the essential supports to back up its promise of a bright future through education. Unlike local schools, teachers and students at KISS routinely attend academic classes, and students have access to learning opportunities (e.g. vocational, athletic, and artistic training) that are unavailable in village schools.[4]

KISS serves as an interesting venue to study conceptions of childhood because it is like a small city (population 25,000) comprised primarily of children. Students from Class 1 to graduate school share one campus, allowing older and younger students to mix freely. It has a high child-to-adult[5] ratio (approximately 29:1) during the instructional day, which rises when many of the teachers go home. This ratio necessitates and encourages students to assume responsibilities for themselves and each other that they may not have assumed outside of KISS. A critical aspect of KISS is the "KISS culture" that is pervasive around campus. Through explicit teaching, and implicit in interactions, KISS students are encouraged to value education, care about others, give back to society, take responsibility, exhibit self-control and "proper behavior," and be proud of their tribal heritage.

Methodology

The study was designed to examine the experience of KISS students and their counterparts who remain in tribal villages to understand the impact of attending school on students' conceptualization of the distinction between being a child and being an adult. The sample was drawn from students in Classes 6–8 who attended KISS or schools in tribal villages in Odisha during the 2014–2015 school year. Of the 51 participants, 27 attended KISS, and 24 attended schools in villages; 30 were girls, and 21 were boys. The median age of the participants was 13 years. The interviews took place at KISS and at government upper primary schools (Classes 6–8) in four Odisha districts (Rayagada, Mayurbhanj, Koraput, and Gajpati).

To conduct the interviews at KISS, we trained 10 graduate students who were in KISS' Tribal Studies or Social Work master's programs. Over a 2-day period, they interviewed 27 KISS students. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and took place in Odia language. Responses were written in Odia. Seven of the interviewers traveled to their native districts to conduct interviews with 24 village students. Once the interviews were complete, we translated the responses into English.

To analyze the data, we entered the responses into an Excel spreadsheet, and the three authors individually examined the data, looking for patterns within and across the two groups. Once we finished our individual analysis, we compared our analyses and discussed similarities and differences. The key analytic dimensions that emerged are as follows:

- Time *in* childhood: How students at KISS and in village schools experienced daily life.
- Time *of* childhood: How students conceptualized the period of life labeled as childhood, including the characteristics they attribute to children.

- Imagined futures: The extent to which children look forward toward adulthood in conceptualizing childhood.
- Role of school in shaping concepts of childhood: The influence of school, either day school or residential school, on students' conceptualization of childhood.

Findings

Time in childhood: daily routines

Attending school and studying occupied most KISS and village students' time. When KISS and village students were asked to describe their daily activities, attending class and studying figured prominently in their descriptions. However, their routines differed when they were not in school. The KISS students described an array of extracurricular activities available outside of class (e.g. organized physical activities, vocational training, and enrichment programs). The following is a representative daily routine for a KISS student:

> I wake up and go for yoga. After that, I go for breakfast and read in my room. I go for prayer class, and at 11:00 I go to class. My morning classes are math, English, and Odia. After I leave the class, I go to lunch. I have class after lunch. At 5:00 I wash my hands and legs, and after that we come to each other in the hostel and teach to our friends, and at night we finish the program. I go to dinner, and then I read up to 10:00, and after that I sleep.

Village students' routines outside of school were quite different. One-half of the students (12) mentioned engaging in free play, while only a few KISS students did (4 = 15%). Additionally, nearly all of the village students described completing morning chores or helping at home. Eight of the village students (33%) described attending tuitions before and after school.[6] As one boy said, "In the morning I study and then I water the plants in my garden. Then I go to school. In the evening I play football; then I study." Another girl said,

> Every day I get up in the morning. I finish my daily chores. From 6:30 to 8:00 I go for tuitions, and then I play and take a bath and then go to school. Then I clean the classroom and offer prayer. From 10:00 until 4:00 I study at school. I return back from school after 4:00; then I have some food. From 4:30 to 6:30 I go for evening tuition. At 8:00, after finishing my dinner, I watch TV and then go to sleep.

Time of childhood: distinguishing childhood from adulthood

We asked several questions to uncover the students' conceptualization of childhood including whether they consider themselves to be children or adults. Most of the students (88% village and 63% KISS) described themselves as children based on their age, activities, knowledge, and behavior. In relation to age, some gave specific years when they will become adults (e.g. 15 or 18 years),[7] while others just said they were too young to be adults. Some students said that they are children because they do not work and that they go to school and play.

We also asked them to compare themselves to their parents and to compare children with adults. They characterized children as having limited knowledge and self-control. For example, a KISS student said,

> I have lesser knowledge than the adults do. The child has a fickle mind, is naughty; he doesn't know anything. He is not able to make his own decisions. He doesn't have ample knowledge. He loves to do things that come to his mind.

Another KISS student said that "The child does not have thinking capacity, does not have much tension. He is irresponsible toward work, and he is peace-loving in nature." One village student said, "The elders have more knowledge while the child is very naughty," and another said, "The children are always into playing and roaming."

Imagined or projected futures

Children looked both to older students and to adults to imagine their future, and nearly all expressed excitement about becoming adults. In distinguishing themselves from older students, adults, and their parents, they focused primarily on differences in knowledge, behaviors, activities, and responsibilities. Of the students who identified as adults, most said that they already display adult knowledge and behavior.

When asked to compare themselves to older students, KISS students emphasized how their "seniors" help them and take care of younger children at KISS. Over half of the KISS students commented that the seniors teach, care for, discipline, or act like an older sibling. For example, a KISS student said,

> The seniors at KISS help us to maintain peace and order in the campus. They show a lot of affection to us. They work at the right time, but I always forget to do things at the right time. At KISS, the elders help us maintain law and order. They talk to us as if they are our own brothers. They show a lot of affection to us. They do all the work on time. But I forget to do most of my work on time because I am only 12 years old.

The village students also spoke positively about their "elder brothers and sisters," but the comments were primarily about older students' increased work responsibilities and more demanding schoolwork.

In comparing children to adults and themselves to their parents, most students said that adults have the knowledge needed to live effectively in society. For example, a KISS student described adults as

> know[ing] what the world is. They are better educated than us. Their daily activities and behavior is high above the children's … They are always eager about different activities in life. They know what the world and society is. The adults have much more knowledge than what we have.

Another KISS student said that "The adult has a fair idea about things. Whatever they do, they do with full knowledge."

Students attributed certain behaviors to adults in general and to their parents in particular. They gave examples of adults exhibiting respect, self-control, and discipline. A KISS student said that "The elders know how to give respect to other individuals, and they know how to give affection to the younger ones." Another KISS student said that

> An adult has his own thinking capacity and knows what is right and wrong, and he knows how to differentiate between a child and grown up. He is responsible towards his life, and he is able to show different emotions like anger, violence, and love according to the situations faced by him.

Both groups of students emphasized work as an adult activity. They described both working at an occupation and taking care of the household. A village student said, "The elders are able to do many works at a time which the children are not able to do." Another village student said that "The adults know how to work and spend their time. The adults have knowledge of how to run a family

and take up responsibilities. That is why they are able to do any kind of work." A KISS student added, "The elders are always busy at work, but the children are always having fun."

As described above, a minority of respondents (12% of village students and 37% of KISS students) considered themselves to be adults. KISS students said they exhibit behaviors (e.g. respecting others and not being naughty) and take on responsibilities (e.g. caring for younger children and acting responsibly) that they associate with adults. For example, one KISS student said, "I am an adult because I know how to function and maintain myself independently. I know now how to give love and affection to others and help them in their work."

The students looked forward to becoming adults. The four most common reasons given were study more, give back to society, get a job, and support their parents. A village student said she wants to be an adult because

> I want to study a lot, and I want to become a role model for others. I want to be a good student. I want to study well and do any kind of good work. After studying well, I will try to make the illiterate children in my village literate and teach them how to be good.

A KISS student concurred, saying,

> I am looking forward to becoming an adult because I will be able to study in a better way. I can shape a better future for me. I will be able to know how to behave and talk and be able to love others in a better way.

Students also want to become adults in order to give back to society. As a KISS student said,

> I am eager to be an adult because I will be able to take full responsibility of my house like my father does. And like a good human being, I will be able to tell people what is right and wrong. And then I can help the poor people, and I also can help the unemployed youth in my village to get employed in some factory. My aim is to work for the upliftment of society and, like Dr. Samanta,[8] I want to be a great person working for the society.

Many students also said that they look forward to being an adult so that they can have a job and help their parents. A village student said,

> I want to become an adult because when I become an adult I will earn a lot of money and will be able to give it to my parents. If there is something that is not at home, I can buy those things. At times when my parents are ill, I can take them to the doctors.

Role of school in shaping concepts of childhood

The preceding discussion points to the role of school in shaping concepts of childhood. Students distinguished between adults who work and children who go to school. Many are also aware of the relationship between age and school completion. Several village students said that they will become an adult when they enter Class 10 or complete school, and over half of the KISS students who identified as children cited either moving on to higher education or completing school as the key transition to adulthood. As one KISS student said, "I will become an adult when I finish my studies, and I am well qualified to do a job."

Differences between the influence of KISS and village schools on respondents' conceptualizations can only be implied from the data. The KISS students were more apt than the village students to emphasize superior knowledge and responsible behavior as an adult trait. They were also less

likely to include doing chores and playing in describing their daily routines although they had chores and there was ample time at KISS for play. Some village students knew KISS students, and they attributed better study habits and maturity to those attending KISS. For example, one village student said of KISS students, "In my opinion, the students at KISS study much better and are able to stand on their own feet, and I feel one day they will be able to do something for the society." Several also mentioned that KISS students speak and behave differently and have exposure to a wider world by attending KISS.

Discussion and conclusion

Indian tribal students attending KISS and government day schools provide insights into the intersection of students' fluid conceptualization of childhood and school's projection of bright futures for students. These students look to the future, to their aspirations and hopes, to shape a conception of self in the present. Through their descriptions of their daily lives and the distinctions they make between themselves and their elders, we conclude that their aspirational futures are very much a part of their present self-concepts and that the schools they attend affect not only their present experience of childhood but also their aspirations and imagined futures.

This conceptualization provides nuance to the sociological and anthropological conceptualizations of childhood as a time that is demeaned and marginalized (Bardy, 1994; Hungerland, 1999; James and Prout, 2015). Although the students in this study emphasized what children lack, for example, knowledge, discipline, and ability to work, we contend that these students were not demeaning themselves. Rather, they were focusing on what they aspire to have: the skills and dispositions they associate with adulthood. In this way, their views can be seen as aspirational, as establishing a self-image in relation to the person they hope to be. Schools, by emphasizing their role as preparation for the future, fuel these aspirations.

When the pull of future aspirations figures centrally in the conception of childhood, we are able to view the intersection of "metatheoretical dimensions" of time and space (James et al., 1998) differently. We have illustrated this intersection in Figure 1. As shown in the upper left, human actions take place within a time continuum in which the past justifies and the future motivates (Appadurai, 2013; Hitlin and Elder, 2007; Vaisey, 2009). In the lower left, social spaces also reflect a time continuum in which past traditions and future aspirations are evident. School, as a social space, orients primarily to the future; school is a place of learning for an imagined future (Frye, 2012). The circle on the right represents childhood as the intersection of time and space; these dimensions ground the experience of childhood in the past and, most importantly, provide a vision of a hopeful future.

This representation builds on our findings and on recent sociological and anthropological thinking on projectivity and hope (Appadurai, 2013; Frye, 2012; Mische, 2009; Vaisey, 2009). In this view, the propensity to look to the future with hope and aspiration is a common and necessary human trait; the present is fleeting, and the future is always before us. By projecting a hopeful, aspirational future, we are motivated in the present to take culturally sanctioned actions that are designed to lead to desired goals (Appadurai, 2013; Vaisey, 2009). An extended concept of time points out limitations of temporal categories such as childhood and adulthood because within each of these life stages, we are constantly looking forward and backward (Hitlin and Elder, 2007); these categories are a social convenience, but they restrict and limit lived experience.

Although looking to the future may be a human trait, the capacity to aspire must be developed, and schools, with their future orientation, have the responsibility to build this capacity. Appadurai (2013) holds that we are all born with the capacity to aspire, but that it develops through having access to people whose aspirations have been achieved and through having opportunities to
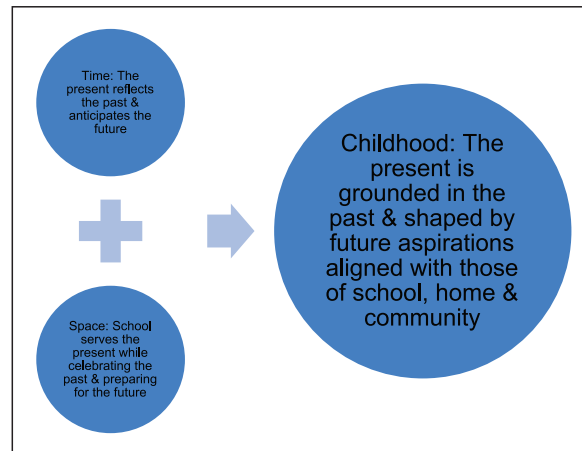
Figure 1. Intersection of time and space in childhood.

succeed. Formal schooling is promoted around the world as such an opportunity (Anderson-Levitt, 2005; Frye, 2012). Although education's promises are often false, especially for the poor, students continue to believe in the promises and hopefully build the capacity to aspire (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Bolten, 2015; Frye, 2012). Our findings illustrate how KISS, and village schools to a lesser degree, provides opportunities, messages, and role models that build students' capacity to aspire. The students in this study aspire to be adults, people they see as productive, knowledgeable, disciplined, and loving.[9] The knowledge and behaviors they attribute to adults are those that they see themselves gaining and developing while in school.

We suggest that students use their imagined futures as adults to motivate themselves to meet school expectations. This is especially true at KISS because with a population of 25,000 students, order and control are essential. KISS students live in an environment in which all systems (dining, academics, hostels, medical, and recreational) have to function smoothly. This requires that everyone, adults and children, assume sets of responsibilities and behaviors that support this smooth functioning. In this environment, the distinction between childhood and adulthood blurs because the knowledge and behaviors students attribute to adults (e.g. respect, self-control, and discipline) are modeled, rewarded, and expected in school. This distinction is further blurred at KISS by the close interactions younger students have with older students. On a daily basis, they encounter older students who exhibit behaviors the KISS students attribute to adults.

In sum, when the temporal boundaries that make up our self-concept are expanded to recognize that the past justifies and the future motivates, we accept a more nuanced conceptualization of categories such as child and childhood. As William James (1981 [1890]) wrote, the present is fleeting, so it is natural that we are always looking forward and back to contemplate who we are. This contemplation occurs within a social context, and school provides a critical social context for children. School's structure, organization, and expectations have easily recognizable effects on how children spend their time and on transitions into and out of childhood, but its most profound effect may be in its ability to build students' capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2013), their opportunity to hope.

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Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used in this article.
2. We use the term "tribal" rather than "adavasi" or "indigenous" because this is the term used by the students.
3. Most rural tribal children attend poorly run and maintained schools, and learning levels are abysmally low (Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), 2015). Explanations for poor academic performance and high dropout rates focus on erratic student and teacher attendance (Govinda and Bandyopadhyay, 2011), the poor quality of teachers and facilities (Bhattacharjea et al., 2011; Sedwal and Kamat, 2011), conflicts over appropriate medium of instruction (Mohanty, 2006; Nambissan, 1994), and different cultural expectations and high illiteracy rates among students' parents (Froerer, 2012).
4. Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS) follows the schedule and curriculum set by the Department of School and Mass Education, State of Odisha.
5. The adults included in this ratio include teachers, administrators, medical staff, hostel workers, and other noninstructional staff.
6. Attending tuitions (out-of-school academic coaching) is very common in India. The poor quality of instruction in schools, especially government schools, is often cited as the reason for paying for out-of-school tuitions.
7. In India, school attendance is compulsory until age 14, and those under age 18 are forbidden to work.
8. Dr Samanta is the founder of KISS and Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (KIIT) and is revered for his vision and philanthropy.
9. The KISS students interact almost exclusively with educated, employed adults, while their village peers interact with a much more diverse group of adults, including those who are unemployed or sporadically employed and those who are illiterate or barely literate.

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