

Conference Post-Reading 2: Children at Work

“Child Labour: Promoting the Best Interests of Working Children”

The following extracts are from a Save the Children publication, which unfortunately we are unable to reproduce in full for copyright reasons. I would highly recommend accessing the full article if you are able. The authors explore what it means to promote "the best interests of the child", a key principle of the UN CRC. They argue that some forms of work can be good for children's development, and assert the importance of evaluating whether specific forms of work are helpful or harmful. They give a number of practical examples of how this would look in practice, including debates about children's work vs. education. They also discuss in much depth (not included here) the importance of including children themselves in policy discussions in order to ensure that a) their problems are addressed correctly and b) they are given opportunities to participate and develop. This is an excellent example of the social theory of childhood applied to debates about children's work. William Myers and Jo Boyden were two of the key theorists/researchers in promoting this "new" approach to childhood.

The full reference for this article is:

Myers, W and Boyden, J. (1998) *Working Children: Promoting the best interests of the child* London: Save the Children.

Available online at <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED430712.pdf>

Extract One: “Introduction”

“Unfortunately, traditional interventions such as minimum age laws, public sector inspection of workplaces and labour practices, control of children's work through work permits, and compulsory school attendance up to a stipulated age are not producing the expected benefits to children. First of all, these measures are not keeping children out of the labour market, or even out of jobs prohibited by law, except in some portions of the formal sector. Second, they have not proved to be very effective at keeping children in school; other incentives and disincentives turn out to be far more influential in determining school enrolment and attendance. Third, and perhaps most importantly, it is not at all clear that, even if they had their intended effect of eliminating most child work and ensuring school attendance, the result would be beneficial for all children. Work of the right kind can be beneficial for children, and some schools are so discouraging or oppressive that they actually do harm to their students.” (pp. 6)

Extract Two: “A New Child-Centred Approach”

“What is required is a more promising vision of the relationship between children and work, a different approach posing new questions that open the way to more effective protection of working children's best interests [...]

This new approach is rigorously child-centred, taking as its point of departure the child, how the child experiences work, and what the child needs to thrive and develop. It judges the appropriateness of work, and of interventions in work, according to their verifiable effects on children. [...] it begins from a position of respect for [working children], for the contribution they make to their families and communities, and for their right and capacity to shape their own lives. It arrives at decisions about children's work, and what should be done about their work, by starting with an in-depth

consideration of the children involved. It develops a response to children's work problems in collaboration with the children and on the basis of what is best for them. [...] it is increasingly clear that working children's views cannot be taken for granted; they have unique knowledge and opinions about their situation that must be taken into consideration if measures to protect them are to succeed. Partly for that reason, and partly to conform with requirements of the CRC, working children and their own organizations have recently begun to be more widely included in local and, to a lesser extent, national and international processes that advocate or develop policies and programmes to protect children against workplace abuse and exploitation." (pp. 7-8)

Extract Three: "Education, Work and Children's Development"

"Because of education's undeniably powerful potential, policy makers and child advocates generally believe school to be the most socially desirable activity for children [...] campaigns against child labour often promote the idea that the place of children in the middle childhood years is universally in school, thereby conveying the ideas that working and attending school are mutually exclusive, and that school is developmental whereas work is not [...] These assumptions about the contribution of school to personal development and the mutual exclusiveness between school and work merit closer examination [...]

While education is indeed incompatible with work in many instances, recent research suggests that is far from the general rule. In many places work and school co-exist, and in some cases children's schooling depends upon their working. In fact many developing country children work in order to pay for the books, paper and pencil, transportation, examination fees, and sometimes even tuition, necessary to attend school. In some homes so poor that not all the family's children can attend school, older children or girls may work full time so that their siblings can study [...] The child-centred question is not whether work and education can go together - they already do all over the world - but how the relationship between them can be made to effectively serve children's best interests.

Returning to the question of how education affects child development, [...] school, like work, can be either detrimental or constructive for children. It is often both. [...] The school experience of low-income children in general, and working children in particular, turns out often to be quite detrimental. To begin with, schools in many places do not accomplish even the narrowest academic objective functional literacy expected of them. Other important cognitive objectives, such as critical thinking or problem solving, are commonly neglected altogether."