

“Child labour” and children’s lives

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People who care for children and are dedicated to trying to improve their lives, sometimes interfere to stop work that appears beneficial, or remove children to situations that have less opportunity, on the grounds that their work is classified as “child labour”. This concept needs scrutiny.

The normalcy of work

- As social beings, we have evolved instinctively to participate in the activities and thinking of those among whom we live.
- Children instinctively imitate activities going on around them, playfully at first, but growing in competence with practice and guidance.
- This is how children learn their culture, with its values and behaviour patterns
- How they establish relationships with those around them.
- How children throughout the world learn housework, agriculture, and household crafts and enterprises.
- For vast numbers, work is not peripheral, but central to the lives of children
- So we should question not why children work, but why some children do not work.

Integral place of work and its benefits

- Work contribute to the livelihoods of children and their families, especially in response to poverty and shocks, and when children have inadequate or no adult support. When such work is excessive, we need to deal with the problem to which work is the solution.
- Work, both economic and domestic, is embedded in and contributes to social relations in families and communities, which are important for human well-being. There is risk to child well-being and development in disrupting such relations.
- Through gradual entry into work, children learn social and life skills.
- Through work, children participate in the life of their communities
- In spite of problems, express good feelings about their work
- Through work they experience and develop responsibility.

The concept of child labour

Nevertheless, work can be excessive, hazardous and interfere with children's education and development. The concept of "child labour" is generally associated with such harmful work, as something to be abolished.

Two problems arise from popular and uncritical use of this term, problems that often result in disruptions and damage to children's lives

- The term "child labour" focusses on harm, and neglects benefits in work. It therefore obscures the fact that much work has potential for both benefits and harm, and that the benefits should be protected while trying to eliminate harm.
- It conflates two different kinds of activity

An example of this second problem is found in the *Handbook for monitoring and evaluation of child labour in agriculture* (FAO, Rome, 2015)

“Child labour is defined as work that impairs children’s well-being or hinders their education, development and future livelihoods.” (p.12)

- In practice, age of employment becomes the dominant criterion, without any consideration of whether this relates to impairing well-being or hindering education (I have come across no evidence that it does)
- Harm is considered only for older children, and appears irrelevant for younger children
- Benefits are not considered in assessment, neglecting important grounds for evaluation

It is common to define “child labour” in terms of harmful work and subsequently to emphasize age of employment, as though these are the same thing

Minimum age of employment (ILO C138, 1973)

- C138, prohibits employment or economic work below a certain age, including work that can be beneficial to children (which it does not consider)
- It does not protect children from harmful work or exploitation above the minimum age or outside economic activities
- Does not effectively support the right to education; but inhibits education through work
- Not all children's work can readily be classified according to the concept of employment in industrialised countries
- A general prohibition on work below a certain age do not match the aims of protecting children from harmful or exploitative work. Indeed, it discriminates against children.

Anomalies

- Children outside the category of employment are not protected
- Children are denied the best jobs, which amounts to discrimination against children, and are sometimes pushed into more hazardous and exploitative work
- Children are denied the opportunity to learn life skills through work
- Children involved in proscribed work are denied support or protection on the grounds that they should not be working
- Efforts of children to improve their lives in the short and long term are denigrated
- Commercial interests in avoiding stigma over-ride the interests of children
- Children's lives and relations are frequently disrupted

Research priorities

- Attend to competing calls on children's time in a changing world
- Study different kinds of learning out of school
- Consider psycho-social benefits and harm arising from work
- Assess harm and benefits of work against each other
- Consider the significance of social relations surrounding work
- Critically assess rights and interventions in relation to outcomes in children's lives, rather than against normative ideals

Thank you

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