Chapter 10

The Problems of Child Labor and Education in Peru

A Critical Analysis of ‘Universal’ Approaches to Youth Development

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Introduction

The spread of ‘modern’ understandings of childhood and youth have not been subject to the same critiques as have dominant theories of international development. Yet, beliefs about young people play important roles in shaping national development and reproducing particular value systems (Ruddick 2003; Katz 2004). Universal indicators of child well-being offer supposedly objective snapshots of how a nation is doing, as measured through the experience of their young people. However, such indicators not only fail to account for different experiences of childhood, but they also play a large role in structuring interventions carried out in the name of child well-being.

Here, I argue that despite increased recognition that childhood and youth are socially constructed and vary depending on the context of young people’s lives (James and Prout 1997), international development organizations and NGOs continue to emphasize one path for young people’s advancement, focusing on the idea of childhood as a time for schooling and play, and not work (Boyden 1997; Green 1998; Ansell 2005). While scholars studying young people in the context of the global north highlight how transitions between life phases are increasingly blurry, and may take multiple forms (Heinz 2009; Furlong 2009), the acknowledgement of this diversity has failed to translate into more flexible international development policies. At a time when unstable employment and increasing costs of education, exacerbated by the 2008–2009 Global Financial Crisis, are re-shaping youth challenges and opportunities, it is especially important that we more critically question the objectives of youth development policies.

In this chapter, I look at three interrelated ideas. I first examine how global trends have led to a proliferation of supposedly universal legislation and governance practices regarding childhood and young people. Second, because of the moral weight that policies carried out in the name of child well-being carry, there is sometimes fear to question supposedly beneficial goals, such as to increase schooling and reduce child labor. However, it is not just that the ideals expressed in legislation and discourse are frequently not realized by poorer young people, but also that such ideals themselves may exacerbate their...
marginalization. Young people’s own attitudes towards work, as well as their ability to access social services, are limited by static conceptions of childhood. Finally, supposedly universal goals such as increased school attendance do not even necessarily reflect the changing global economy. Thus, I highlight a need to look at what actual opportunities and consequences result from a focus on schooling as the exclusive space for all children to advance.

Currently, there is a significant disconnect between critical youth studies and actual goals and objectives of child development organizations. As we move towards creating an agenda for critical youth studies for the 21st Century, it is imperative that we begin to address this gap. By highlighting young people’s own experiences of work and school, I challenge the ability to utilize assumptions about ‘universal’ childhoods as a way to garner support for particular development models, arguing instead that we need to take into consideration the goals of young people themselves, as well as the socio-economic context of their lives. In my focus on Peru, I also address a lack of studies examining young people’s transitions in non-Western contexts (for exceptions see Ansell 2004; Punch 2004; Van Blerk 2008).

This research is part of a larger project consisting of 14 months of fieldwork in Lima and Cusco Peru, over 100 interviews with government officials, social workers, educators and nongovernmental organizations, and participant observation and in-depth interviews with 69 children and young people working in Peru’s informal economy. For this chapter, I focus predominantly on interviews conducted with two groups of working young people aged 12 to 17: those that were still attending school, and those that had already dropped out, as well as a survey with 18 young people at a public secondary school in the desert hills surrounding Lima. I look at young people’s experiences and motivations for working, and how such opportunities are increasingly limited, as well as their understanding of school and the role they see both school and work playing in opening up future opportunities. A focus on this age is especially important because they are often in a position where they may drop out of school, are facing increased work demands, and may start spending more time sleeping and working in the streets. Yet, they are still subject to special laws for children even though such laws are often modelled after images of younger children and legal categories of childhood established by international organizations.

‘Universal’ Notions of Childhood: The Peruvian Context

The United Nations’ legal category of ‘child’ refers to all young people under the age of 18. Such a category overlooks the wide variation and difference in