



# COMBATting CHILD LABOUR

## Listen to what the children say

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This article summarizes some features of the Radda Barnen (Swedish Save the Children) study 'Children's Perspectives on their Working Lives'. The case is made for working children's participation in the process of combatting child labour. Their participation will help ensure that interventions designed to eliminate exploitative and hazardous child labour are context appropriate, locally sustainable and child centred. This study is a contribution to the process. A specially designed Children's Perspectives Protocol guided group activities with over 300 children in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, the Philippines and Central America. This article summarizes selected issues addressed by the study, including children's occupational preferences and their views on work and school.

### Background

Numerous reports have focused attention on the large numbers of the world's children working in conditions believed to be hazardous, abusive, exploitative or in other ways detrimental to their development (e.g. Bequele and Boyden, 1988; Fyfe, 1989; Marcus and Harper, 1996; Myers, 1991; UNICEF, 1997). Recently, the International Labour Office proposed a new convention designed to 'Target the Intolerable' (ILO, 1996). The text submitted to the 1998 International Labour Conference proposes the content of the new convention, in terms of securing 'the immediate suppression of all extreme forms of child labour' including taking measures 'to prevent children from engaging in extreme forms of child labour' as well as 'arranging for their removal from such labour and for their rehabilitation' (ILO, 1998: paras 8 and 11). Reducing the incidence of children working in exploitative and hazardous situations is a widely welcomed goal. Implementation of that goal raises several issues.

A first concern is about the outcome of interventions that target impoverished, vulnerable children, for whom work may be essential for survival and at the core of personal identity. At worst, such interventions risk inadvertently undermining their security unless followed through by sustained

and comprehensive measures that they recognize as genuinely improving their prospects. Ensuring that intervention strategies are in children's long-term best interests is especially important in contexts of acute poverty and social change, where schooling may be inadequate and alternative work prospects restricted.

A second concern is about whether children themselves have a part to play in the process. Intervention strategies framed in terms of 'removal' and 'rehabilitation' emphasize working children's rights to protection from hazard and exploitation, with less apparent regard for their rights to be consulted about their destiny and their potential to participate in the process of working for a better future.

A third concern is about the images of childhood that underpin the child labour debate. What counts for a 'quality childhood' and how can it best be promoted within international and national standards? One image emphasizes the *relativity* of childhood, shaped by geography, wealth and poverty; social organization and family patterns; cultural beliefs and practices; and social changes, consequent on modernization, urbanization, etc. The second emphasizes *universal* and enduring principles of children's psychological development, their needs and their rights. The danger comes when specific cultural images of child development quality are promoted as a standard, under the guise of universal principles (Boyden, 1997). For example, textbook images of 'childhood' are largely based on the experience of western experts carrying out research within the context of economically advanced western societies (Woodhead, 1996, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 1999).

In making progress to reduce the prevalence of extreme forms of child labour a first challenge is to establish quality standards that are both universal and which sufficiently reflect the diversity of childhood, viewed within broad cultural and historical context. A second challenge is to construct procedures for applying these quality standards in context-appropriate, culture-sensitive, locally sustainable and child-centred ways. A third challenge is to ensure that children – the principal stakeholders – are active participants in the process.

The study reported here was part of a larger project undertaken by Radda Barnen (Swedish Save the Children) in order to inform the current debate about child labour with evidence from working children themselves, engaged in a wide range of occupations, in contrasting regions of the world. Other parts of the project included a series of case studies of programmes for working children (Tolfree, 1998), and a comprehensive analysis of the child work issue (Boyden et al., 1998).

### **Child labour and children's perspectives**

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) provided the starting-point for this study:

States Parties recognise the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development. (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989: Article 32)

Successful implementation demands establishing criteria for deciding what kinds of work are exploitative, hazardous and harmful to these diverse aspects of children's development. One approach, based on distinguishing 'child work' from 'child labour' has been challenged as too vague, too general and ultimately circular. An alternative approach places types of work on a continuum, with the most harmful and extreme at one end, and the least harmful (and possibly even beneficial) at the other end (White, 1996). This approach has potential, provided the continuum is recognized as multidimensional (including physical demands, potential health hazards, psychological stress, environmental quality, relationship to the employer, levels of coercion, economic exploitation, etc.).

One problem with a 'continuum' approach is the way effects of work are conceptualized. Identifying levels of 'hazard' and 'harm' both suggest a very direct effect of work on children's well-being. For physical trauma and injury this may be appropriate, although even this kind of effect is more complex than words like 'harmful' suggest. And much of the debate is not about physical harm. It is about 'psychological harm' to the child's 'mental, spiritual, moral or social development'. For these psychological aspects of development, a mechanistic model of cause and effect is much less appropriate. Whether young people are affected positively or negatively by their work experiences depends on their personal vulnerability, which is in turn mediated by the economic, social and cultural context of their work, especially the value placed on their economic activity and the expectations for their development and social adjustment. With the possible exception of extreme cases of forced or bonded labour, children are not simply passive victims, physically and psychologically 'damaged' by their work. They are social actors, trying to make sense of their physical and social world, negotiate with parents and peers, employers and customers, and make the best of the oppressive and difficult circumstances in which they find themselves. They shape their working life as well as being shaped by it. Their work is part of their activity and (to greater or lesser degree) it may become part of their identity.

For this reason, listening to children's feelings, perceptions and views is an essential source of evidence on the way work affects their development, especially psychosocial aspects of development. Their feelings about work, about school and about core social relationships that support or undermine their dignity and sense of security are vital indicators of hazard and harm. Carrying out a study of children's perspectives is not an alternative to conventional evaluation research. Such research may demonstrate long-term

toxic effects of hazardous work, of which young people themselves are oblivious. Multiple approaches are required to determine the impact of work in children's lives, that acknowledge multiple perspectives as well as the impact of specific situations and experiences (Greenfield and Cocking, 1994). Ideally, studying children's perspectives would be complemented by the perspectives of families, employers, non-working school children, etc.

There is another reason for ensuring that children's voices are heard in the child labour debate. According to the UN Convention, children have the right to be protected from harmful work, but they also have the right to express their views on issues that directly affect them:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989: Article 12)

This research was founded on the belief that respecting Article 12 demands appropriate ways be found to ensure children's participation in the decision processes that shape their lives. Of course, researching children's perspectives is not a substitute for direct participation but it can complement direct participation. The Radda Barnen study concentrated on groups of young people whose voices might otherwise not be heard – children in local settings, most of whom have no direct involvement with child workers' organizations, or with NGOs providing support for working children. The Children's Perspectives Protocol was specially designed to structure group activities with diverse groups of working children.

### **The Children's Perspectives Protocol**

Participatory research methods have become increasingly well established in recent years, notably in development studies (Chambers, 1995). Applied to childhood, they enable young participants to construct a representation of their social world (Johnson et al, 1995, 1998; PLA Notes, 1996; Redd Barna, 1994). The Children's Perspectives Protocol is informed partly by these participatory methods, and partly by more conventional methods used by developmental and social psychologists (see, for example, Durkin, 1995).

The Children's Perspectives Protocol is a resource for group work with participants of similar age, occupation and gender. It requires a minimum of two fieldworkers, one to facilitate the group and the other to record the information (audio and/or video, as well as structured notes). The groups are conducted informally, ideally spread over several days. The protocol yields a combination of qualitative and quantitative information, supported by verbatim quotations from children. Fieldworkers are encouraged to adapt the objectives to local circumstances, in order that children can represent their

feelings and beliefs in whatever ways are most meaningful to them, including drawings, mapping, role play as well as group discussion. At the heart of the protocol are a series of semi-structured activities and games focusing on key themes in children's lives. Many are based around locally produced picture cards which children can compare, sort and rank, yielding a combination of individual and group responses. In brief, the activities are:

- *Activity 1*: 'My day' invites children to describe their daily lives, using drawings and mapping techniques;
- *Activity 2*: 'My work' explores the circumstances of children's work and the detail of the activities they undertake;
- *Activity 3*: 'Who matters?' asks about children's social networks, the quality of key relationships, as well as their own self-evaluation;
- *Activity 4*: 'Work and school' asks what children consider are the bad as well as the good things about their work, and then repeats the activity for school, before establishing which is their preference;
- *Activity 5*: 'Which work is best?' entails children ranking children's occupations (including their own) in terms of relative desirability/undesirability, and exploring the criteria on which children base these judgements;
- *Activity 6*: 'What is a child?' examines the children's own views on child development. They are asked to judge a wide range of work activities in terms of age-appropriateness;
- *Activity 7*: 'What if?' presents children with common dilemmas facing working children and invites them to comment in terms of what is likely to happen next and what could be done to help;
- *Activity 8*: 'Life stories' provides investigators with an opportunity to explore the issues in Activity 1–7 with a particular child, in order to enrich the level of detail provided from group work.

In this article I concentrate on initial evidence from just two of these activities. Further details are provided in the full report (Woodhead, 1998a).

### **The sample**

The study was carried out by local fieldworkers in four regions: Bangladesh, Ethiopia, the Philippines and the Central American countries: El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. More than 300 girls and boys participated in 49 groups during 1996/7, most aged 10–14 years. The choice of occupations was intended to reflect a wide range of rural as well as urban working situations including: farming, plantation work, fishing, mining, market work, porters, shoeshine and sex work. Only a selection of these occupations are represented in the brief account that follows.

### Children talk about which work is best

Activity 5 of the Children's Perspectives Protocol asked children which kinds of work they see as the most and the least desirable, and what criteria they use to make their judgements. Groups were asked to sort five (or in some cases six) familiar children's occupations, using picture cards laid out along the floor as a prompt. A ranking of occupations from the 'best' to the 'worst' was achieved through a process of progressive comparisons. First the children were asked to judge their own occupation by comparison with the other occupations pictured on the cards. This resulted in two groups of occupations – those 'better than ours' and those 'worse than ours'. For the second stage of the procedure, children were asked to sort within these groups. In this way, children with little experience of ranking were enabled to lay out the cards in rank order.

Through this activity young people demonstrated their ability to weigh up multiple considerations, about income, independence and autonomy, security, safety, health, openness to abuse, gender appropriateness, etc. An edited extract from the transcript of one of the shoeshine groups in Ethiopia illustrates the point. The group facilitator (GF) begins by holding up the picture card of the boys' occupation (shoeshine) and asks them to compare it with another picture card (of a car watcher). The shoeshine boys (SSBs) reply:

*SSBs:* Thieves will steal from us; we prefer shoeshining.

*GF:* How? Tell me.

*SSBs:* If we are attending to a car, for example, it may be taken away from us by force. If the indicator light is stolen, the driver/owner will hold us responsible. But the shoeshine box is our own, there is no other problem. If you make money good, if you don't you just have to accept it . . .

*GF:* Alright. Which of these is worse? (Holds up 'shoeshine' and 'taxi-boy' picture cards).

*SSBs:* Taxi-boy.

*GF:* Why taxi-boy? Is it the worst of all these?

*SSBs:* For health reasons.

*GF:* What else?

*SSBs:* You may fall off the taxi, you may be accused of cheating on the fee collected. You will be in trouble.

*GF:* What else? Enough?

*GF:* Which of these three is worse? (Holds up 'newspaper seller', 'lottery seller' and 'farmer').

*SSBs:* Selling newspapers.

*GF:* Tell me the reason.

*SSBs:* It may become out of date fast. . . . If it is out of date, you will lose money; it is only 50 cents each that papers are sold for after the insurance date . . .

*GF:* Why have you selected working as shoeshine [as the best]? Tell me your reasons.

*SSBs:* If we lose it [the shoeshine box] it is our own property. . . . If you make some money or if you don't there is not much harm done. You will wait for the

next day. . . . No loss, like selling newspapers. . . . And unless you roam around, you won't lose. . . . We only lose as a shoeshine when or if customers don't come and if polish is not available.

Many groups in our study produced rankings similar to these shoeshine boys in Addis Ababa – favouring their own occupation more than other options available. In the Philippines, a group of children in farm work felt the same way:

This is the best work . . . we don't have to leave our families . . . we work with our parents . . . we can feed the whole nation.

Other groups did not necessarily agree with children's ranking of their own occupation. For example, children working in fishing thought differently about their peers in farming:

It is hot in the sugar fields. You easily get tired. Your body itches.

Agricultural work is very dangerous to children because your arms might get cut by a scythe.

Children's positive evaluation of their own occupation can be taken as an indicator of personal and cultural investment in coping with a familiar situation, even when it is hazardous and exploitative. The exceptions are also instructive – where groups placed their own occupation low on the ranking. This may be an indicator that their work is a source of cultural stigma and personal shame. For example, sex work stood apart from the other occupations children were asked to judge. The two groups of female prostitutes in Ethiopia both ranked their occupation among the worst. As one girl said:

It is better being called thief than being called prostitute.

### *An example from Bangladesh*

To illustrate the way children's beliefs about their work can inform the child labour debate, I provide details from the local study in Bangladesh. Data from four groups of boys and girls are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Both groups of boys working in the informal sector (in weaving and embroidery) favoured their own work above all the others they were asked to judge. Their pride in their own work overshadowed any hardships they suffered. They felt that their work was the most strenuous of all – having to work long hours without a fan and being subject to abuse. Even so, they compared their position favourably to the abuse received by tempo helpers and porters:

A porter often gets beaten by customers. . . . We too get beaten and verbally abused frequently, but then it is from only one person [the employer] not the public.

They were convinced their work was the best, not least because it was part of their family tradition:

In this work we can maintain our parents' respectability.

**Table 1** Which work is best? Boys' groups in Bangladesh

Occupations	Groups			
	Informal sector	Informal sector	Porter	Porter
	Group 1 Rank	Group 2 Rank	Group 1 Rank	Group 2 Rank
Flower seller	3	2	2	4
Brick-chipper	5	5	4	5
Domestic	6	3	5	3
Porter	4	4	3 <sup>a</sup>	2 <sup>a</sup>
Tempo helper	2	6	1	1
Informal sector	1 <sup>a</sup>	1 <sup>a</sup>	–	–

<sup>a</sup> Own occupation.

Neither group of porters viewed their own work as the best. They appeared to be making judgements in terms of a clear sense of career progression, ranking the job of a tempo helper at the top of the list, because it might lead on to becoming a tempo driver:

They can earn much more than a porter because they also get the chance to make extra money as well as get two free meals a day. . . . By being a helper one can gradually become a driver.

Neither brick-chipping nor domestic work were ranked very favourably by any of these groups of boys. Brick-chipping was seen as the worst kind of work by boys working in embroidery within the informal sector

It is poorly paid and very hard work [as a brick-chipper] . . . I would have to sit and work under the sun the whole day. . . . Even if my head is spinning due to working under the sun, *malik* [employer] will insist that I continue to break bricks. And when it comes to paying he will pay me less since I was unable to break a lot.

Porters viewed brick-chipping in a similar way:

I would not like to do this work because it is very hard. . . . Your hand aches a lot and there are blisters on your fingers. Also the hammer can crush your fingers and the brick chips can get into your eyes and turn you blind.

Asked about domestic work, these boys were worried about vulnerability to exploitation and abuse at the hands of an employer from whom there is little escape. The value of independence was a recurring theme, especially for street-based workers. Participants in one of the porter groups said:

It is not good to work for someone. Even if you have not stolen anything you are made into a thief because the Saheb thinks so.

If I don't feel like it I won't work for a day but a domestic helper has to work even if he doesn't want to.

Turning to the girls' groups in Table 2, brick-chipping and domestic work



**Table 2** Which work is best? Girls' groups in Bangladesh

<i>Occupations</i>	<i>Groups</i>			
	<i>Brick-chipper</i>	<i>Brick-chipper</i>	<i>Domestic</i>	<i>Domestic</i>
	<i>Group 1</i>	<i>Group 2</i>	<i>Group 1</i>	<i>Group 2</i>
	<i>Rank</i>	<i>Rank</i>	<i>Rank</i>	<i>Rank</i>
Flower seller	1	2	3	3
Brick-chipper	3 <sup>a</sup>	2 <sup>a</sup>	5	4
Domestic	4	4	1 <sup>a</sup>	2 <sup>a</sup>
Porter	5	5	4	5
Garment worker	2	1	2	1

<sup>a</sup> Own occupation.

were also ranked low, except where girls were actually doing the job. So a brick-chipper considered the treatment from her own parents harsh, but saw this as preferable to the beatings suffered by domestic workers:

Parents feed us – they can also beat us. But getting beaten in another person's home we couldn't bear.

The vulnerability of the domestic worker, at the mercy of her employer, was highlighted by another brick-chipper:

She has to wash clothes, wash utensils and mop floors everyday. There is no respite even when she is unwell. Bibi shaheb will say, 'take a tablet and work'. [Whereas in brick-chipping] . . . the day I feel unwell I can take a rest. My mother will ask me not to work that day, but it is not the same in domestic help.

The domestic helpers themselves thought differently. They recognize these difficulties about their work. Even so they assert the positive aspects:

We get to eat well and work within the house instead of burning under the sun like in brick-chipping.

Another concentrated on the household skills she was learning:

. . . when a girl [in domestic work] gets married and goes to her in-law's house, she will be appreciated for her work.

While these groups of brick-chippers and domestic workers tried to assert the benefits of their working situation, in three out of four cases they ranked another occupation as better than their own. Two kinds of work were favoured – flower selling and garment manufacture:

A person who knows how to sew gets Tk.1200. When it is time for us to marry and people ask what we do, it will feel good to tell them we work in a garment factory instead of as a domestic helper.

Wages are much higher than brick-chipping . . . we can eat on time . . . wages increase with experience . . . and we don't have to work under the sun like brick-chipping.

These young women recognize that there are hazards in garment work, but

they see this as preferable to their current situation. A domestic worker commented:

The floor manager and others might take money but they don't hit you like when you work as a domestic helper.

Another said:

In the garment factory there are times when you are scolded. But that is to help you learn the skill. Whereas in domestic help after working so hard they beat us and verbally abuse us, but not for our own good.

### *Implications*

Listening to these young people's perspectives is a valuable complement to more 'objective' criteria for judging which are the worst kinds of work. They draw attention to the personal investment many young people place in their own occupation, despite the arduous conditions and hazards. They also highlight the way children judge their occupation relative to other possibilities that might be open to them – taking account of hazards, costs and benefits.

Listening to the children's perspective is especially significant in the context of international intervention to remove children from hazardous conditions. Ironically, the very occupation to which many girls in Bangladesh aspire is the one from which they have been excluded. The Bangladesh garment industry has been a focus of these efforts. The threat of an international boycott in 1993 forced manufacturers to exclude large numbers of children from their factories. When an ILO/UNICEF study followed up the children excluded from garment manufacture, they found none had subsequently attended school, and many were engaged in more hazardous and exploitative occupations, including brick-chipping and domestic service (cited in White, 1996: 833). The problem is particularly acute for groups, for whom opportunities are already severely constrained. As White has argued: 'any boycott or international sanctions must first, select the right target; and second, ensure that the objective is one which the target group [in this case exploited working children] would agree' (White, 1996: 835).

The importance of acknowledging that 'the target' is also the principal stakeholder, who very probably has a well-developed perspective on their situation, is further demonstrated in children's perspectives on work and school.

### **Children talk about work and school**

In much of the debate about the detrimental effects of work, attending school is assumed to be the solution. In the Convention on the Rights of the Child, this is clear if Article 32 is compared with Article 28. Article 32 (quoted earlier) states that it is part of children's rights to be *protected* from certain

kinds of ‘harmful’ work. Article 28 states that it is part of children’s rights to be *required* to attend primary school:

States Parties recognise the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall in particular:

(a) Make primary education *compulsory* and free to all. (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989: Article 28; emphasis added)

The implicit assumption is that schooling will be both a positive experience and will benefit children’s long-term prospects. By asking children about their perceptions of school in relation to work, we were able to gain a perspective on these issues, from the consumers’ point of view.

For Activity 4 of the Children’s Perspectives Protocol, a picture card representing the children’s work was placed on the floor, with a picture card of a ‘happy face’ on one side, and a ‘sad face’ on the other side. Children were asked about the good things about being a working child, the things that made them feel happy, pleased, proud, confident. They were then asked about the bad things about their work, the things that make them sad, frightened, angry, bored. Once the children’s ideas had been fully explored, the ‘work’ card was replaced by a ‘school’ card, and the procedure repeated, asking first about good things, and then about bad things. The second part of the activity asked children to compare school with work and judge what was best for them in their present circumstances, and why.

Tables 3 and 4 summarize children’s comments about both the ‘bad things’ and the ‘good things’ about work. Major themes are listed, along with the percentage of groups in which each of these themes was mentioned. Note that in presenting group data of this kind, it is not possible to know how many children within the group expressed these views, nor the relative importance of each theme to them personally.

**Table 3** ‘Bad things’ about work: major themes in girls’ and boys’ groups

	<i>All groups</i> (Total = 49)	<i>Girls’ groups</i> (Total = 24)	<i>Boys’ groups</i> (Total = 25)
<i>Major themes</i>	<i>% groups<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>% groups<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>% groups<sup>a</sup></i>
Hazardous conditions	76	83	68
Health/injury risk	51	58	44
Humiliation/abuse	45	42	48
Economic exploitation	43	46	40
Effects on schooling	27	25	28
General insecurity	49	54	44

<sup>a</sup> Percentage of groups mentioning this theme.

*'Bad things' about work*

Hazardous working conditions was the most consistently mentioned theme, for example among these boys mining for lead in Guatemala:

We get tired because we have to crawl when we work . . . we have to come out bent over carrying the load. We can't stand up because then we hit our heads on the rock . . . we have to use a light, a lamp that we strap to our foreheads.

Some occupations also talked about fatigue, monotony and the constant demands for more work to be done, illustrated by participants who make fireworks in Guatemala:

I get bored and tired of always sitting down or standing up, we hardly move from the same place.

In the Philippines, young girls (7–10 years old) working in the sugar plantations listed some of the problems they face:

We work barefoot and the ground is hot. . . . The tools are sharp. . . . The soil is hard to break . . . I get scratches . . . I get itchy.

Some participants were so familiar with these hazards, that they took them for granted:

I hurt myself with a scythe . . . but I think this is a natural part of growing up.

A girl brick-chipper in Bangladesh described the risk of eye injuries, as well as the effects of the heat:

It is very painful when a splinter from the brick gets into your eyes. One can go blind. . . . I don't like sitting under the sun without any shade and brick-chipping. My head spins. I often get fever at night. Many people die working under the sun.

A recurring theme in the children's comments is not so much about the work itself, but about the way they are treated. Children feel vulnerable to those with greater power and authority. They talk about people who bully, extort money, make unreasonable demands, mislead them, ridicule them, humiliate them, beat them or abuse them in other ways. Sources of abuse include employers, customers, police, members of the public and other children. Domestic workers (girls) were among the most vulnerable to ill-treatment by employers. Comments from girls in the Philippines and Bangladesh included:

They shout at me and I am always reprimanded. . . . I work until midnight. I cannot rest or go out. . . . The dog's food is better than mine. . . . My employer controls my life.

Whenever my employer is going out, she locks me in from the outside, as if I'm going to steal everything in their house.

Street work is another context where children can feel vulnerable. Boys and girls working as vendors, porters or shoeshine all described incidents of humiliation, intimidation and abuse, as in this example:

When at times a customer is kind and gives us a fruit while [she is] buying some, we feel good. But as soon as the customer is out of sight, the fruit seller will snatch it away from our hands and accuse us of stealing.

Just under half the groups also spoke about their experiences of economic exploitation. Young people complain about being deprived of earnings, not being paid on time or that they are cheated out of what they feel they deserve.

Whether young people saw their work as interfering with school depended on their local situation. The pressures of reconciling work with school attendance and performance were most keenly felt by young people in the Philippines. For example:

We are always late for school . . . our teachers don't bother about us because we are always absent.

I should be concentrating on school, not work . . . even when I am tired I must go to school.

#### *'Good things' about work*

The interrelationship between school and work also shows in comments about 'good things'. Not surprisingly, the economic benefits of work were uppermost in children's minds. Three girls (in Bangladesh, Nicaragua and the Philippines) sum up this theme:

In our life, money is the most important thing.

I can support myself from my work without needing anybody else's help.

You give money to your mum, to buy rice, beans and sugar.

A common theme referred to earning money in order to pay for the costs of schooling:

We buy shoes and clothes that our parents can't give us, we also buy notebooks, books and pencils for our studies.

**Table 4** 'Good things' about work: major themes in girls' and boys' groups

	<i>All groups</i> (Total = 49)	<i>Girls' groups</i> (Total = 24)	<i>Boys' groups</i> (Total = 25)
<i>Major themes</i>	<i>% groups<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>% groups<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>% groups<sup>a</sup></i>
Earning money	76	71	80
Supporting family	63	62	64
Skills and training	37	46	28
Pride and respect	29	25	32
Friendship/having fun	22	33	12
Others	29	29	28

<sup>a</sup> Percentage of groups mentioning this theme.

In most groups earning money was closely linked to supporting their family:

My mother is happy when I am able to pay for my family's daily expenses.

We help our parents with household expenses.

While participants were most aware of the economic benefits of working, work was also seen as offering skills and training. As a girl working in fishing in the Philippines said:

I learn to be industrious and helpful . . . I am being trained for the future when others will employ me.

Several other young people were even more reflective about working hard now in order to ensure their future:

I learn how to work young so that when I get married I can already feed my family.

A gender difference was found in the importance attached to work as a source of friendships and social support (eight girls' groups vs three boys' groups). For a brick-chipper, working was a social experience:

It gives me the chance to sit alongside my friends and work as well as chat. It keeps me happy and I can break a lot of bricks.

Friends were also important in times of crisis, as a girl snack seller in Ethiopia described:

I feel happy . . . if I do not have any money to buy Kollo for selling . . . my friend lends me money.

Despite the difficulties of their circumstances, young people also talked about having fun. The same snack vendors in Ethiopia talked about when they visit the bars:

I feel happy when I get the chance to watch TV in bars and also sell. . . . When I see a person with his money being drunk and losing himself I laugh. . . . We feel happy when a customer comes along smiling.

### *'Good things' about school*

Table 5 summarizes children's comments on the 'good things' about school. As before, major themes are listed, along with the percentage of groups in which each of these themes was mentioned. Literacy and numeracy was the most consistent theme, mentioned even more frequently among girls' than boys' groups, for example as by a girl farm worker in Guatemala:

We learn to read and write in order to defend ourselves in life.

Only half the groups in this study referred to the theme of improved job prospects as one of the benefits of school, as from this participant in the Philippines:

I want to learn more. I want to raise our standard of living.

I can escape from the work on the farm.

**Table 5** 'Good things' about school: major themes in girls' and boys' groups

<i>Major themes</i>	<i>All groups</i>	<i>Girls' groups</i>	<i>Boys' groups</i>
	<i>(Total = 48)</i>	<i>(Total = 23)</i>	<i>(Total = 25)</i>
	<i>% groups<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>% groups<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>% groups<sup>a</sup></i>
Literacy/numeracy, etc.	69	78	60
Improved work prospects	56	57	56
School achievements, etc.	33	30	36
Learning skills and discipline	31	30	32
Peer relationships	60	61	60
Being able to play	46	30	60
Relationship with teacher	25	30	20
Gaining respect/ feeling good	25	17	32

<sup>a</sup> Percentage of groups mentioning this theme.

A boy in fireworks manufacture in Guatemala was reflective about the best way to improve prospects, not just for himself but for his own children:

Study helps us to improve ourselves and obtain a better job in which we make more money, because then our children will not suffer or have to go to work.

The second most commonly mentioned category of good things about school was about making friends:

I like September because it is the time I meet my friends.

[School is good because] schoolmates help you and lend you things.

School was also a rare opportunity to play with friends, especially for boys' groups:

I have time to play ball with my friends, because I don't have time to play during my working hours.

Establishing positive relationships with teachers was also important to some groups:

They guide us, love us, support us and take care of us, they teach us new things.

Good experiences in school were closely linked in many participants' minds to their self-respect in the community:

When I get good results, everyone in the family and neighbourhood praises me.

For some children, exchanging their work clothes for school uniforms was the attraction:

I want to become a schoolchild because they look so clean in their uniforms.

**Table 6** 'Bad things' about school: major themes in girls' and boys' groups

<i>Major themes</i>	<i>All groups</i>	<i>Girls' groups</i>	<i>Boys' groups</i>
	<i>(Total = 47)</i>	<i>(Total = 23)</i>	<i>(Total = 24)</i>
	<i>% groups<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>% groups<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>% groups<sup>a</sup></i>
Humiliation/ punishments	53	57	50
Beatings/abuse	45	48	42
Peer relationships	55	61	50
Low achievement	51	57	46
Teacher absence	15	17	13
Tiredness/boredom	23	30	17
Costs of schooling	19	22	17
Competing pressures	19	22	17
Others	40	35	46

<sup>a</sup> Percentage of groups mentioning this theme.

### *'Bad things' about school*

While children recognize the potential for school achievement as a 'good thing' about school, for many the reality is much less positive (Table 6). A shoeshine boy in Ethiopia explained the many reasons why he was disillusioned with school:

I feel ashamed when I fail in examinations, when I am not able to answer when a teacher asks me something, when I repeat the same grade, when I miss classes, when I am not able to do my homework.

Working children cannot be expected to make much progress in school if their teachers do not show up. Absentee teachers was a particular concern for participants from one Guatemalan village, where both groups reported the problem:

Teachers often lie to us. They say, we are going to come such-and-such a day and then they don't come after all.

A very common theme was about school being a harsh and humiliating experience, as expressed by these young people in the Philippines:

[They] pinch us . . . throw erasers at us . . . pull our hair . . . hit us with big sticks . . . make us kneel, hands raised and put books on our hands.

Another comment came from a group of farm workers in Bangladesh:

They beat us with a cane or a bamboo stick on our palms or back. . . . At times they also push our head under a table and hit us on the buttocks.

A snack vendor in Ethiopia described what happened to her:

When my parents did not buy exercise books, the teacher beat me.

Other children can also be a source of humiliation at school, as recounted by young people in Nicaragua, Ethiopia and the Philippines:



Children from richer families tease and insult us by mentioning our work.

Boys bully us in the school compound and outside.

They laughed at me because I have no shoes and I have dirty clothes.

Once again, school issues were closely linked to work issues in many children's minds. Participants referred to the costs of schooling, compounded by the loss of earnings while in school:

I cannot earn money . . . I have not enough money for my school expenses.

Even if working children manage to cover the costs of schooling, they still face major practical pressures of combining the demands of school with the necessity of work, as in these comments from Bangladesh and Guatemala:

Before going to school, my mother asks me to do some work. By the time I complete the work I'm late for school.

When I used to be late for school because I had to complete my household chores before leaving for school, the teacher used to beat me. She did not listen to what I said.

### **Children talk about combining work with school**

So far, I have briefly summarized some of the themes expressed by children when asked to talk about their work and school. Participants in this study were also asked their views on the place of work and school in their lives. Picture cards representing 'school' and 'work' were placed side by side and the children asked:

'In your present family circumstances, which is best for you?

- only going to work
- only going to school
- going to work and attending school.'

For this part of the Children's Perspectives Protocol, individual responses were collected for 300 working children. It is important to emphasize that children were asked to comment on their present situation. They were not asked to speculate about idealized futures, and this no doubt affected their judgement.

Combining work and school was the overwhelming preference, by 77 percent of children in this study. These children recognized the potential benefits of attending school, but they were also aware of the difficulties, both the direct costs (fees, etc.) and indirect costs (loss of income), as well as the other negative aspects of schooling revealed by the earlier part of the activity. Comparing boys with girls, the pattern is broadly similar, although more girls favour 'only school' and more boys 'only work'.

However, these results conceal the wide range of situations faced by

**Table 7** Which is best for you in your present circumstances?  
– comparing four contexts

	<i>Groups in Bangladesh (72 children) (%)</i>	<i>Groups in Ethiopia (42 children) (%)</i>	<i>Groups in the Philippines (81 children) (%)</i>	<i>Groups in Cent. America (106 children) (%)</i>
Work only	24	29	4	1
Work and school	76	69	79	78
School only	0	2	17	21

children in this study, which shapes their judgement. A comparison between child workers in Central America, the Philippines, Ethiopia and Bangladesh illustrates the point (Table 7).

A feature of children's judgements is the consistency with which combining school with work is favoured as the core option (between 69 percent and 79 percent in each region). Many of these participants did not see them as alternatives. Schooling is desirable, but work is a necessity. Work provides the income to support basic necessities, for self and family, and in many cases makes it possible to afford the additional costs of going to school, as illustrated by the following examples.

It will not do us any good if we just work. We will have to go to school. Learn to write our names. First we have to complete our work and then go to school.

We have to help our parents, if we are very poor, we have to help them with the costs of studying and other things that are lacking in the home.

Isn't it natural for children to work and study at the same time? . . . All study makes your body weak, and all work makes your mind poor.

Even a king's food finishes one day, so it is important to continue working a little.

In summary, 'work and school' is the majority choice across all local studies. In drawing this conclusion, it is important to emphasize that this study is not based on systematic sampling of working children, and children's views may not be representative of the wider population in each region.

The minority choices in Table 7 are also instructive. 'Work only' was chosen by 24 percent of participants in Bangladesh and by 29 percent in Ethiopia; very few chose 'school only'. By contrast, 'school only' was the favoured alternative for 17 percent of participants in the Philippines and 21 percent in Central America, and very few chose 'work only'. These contrasts appear related to the availability and economic significance of schooling in these countries. School attendance among participants varied: 8 percent in Bangladesh, 57 percent in Ethiopia (part-time), 79 percent in the Philippines, 58 percent in Nicaragua and 100 percent in Guatemala. But other factors also come into play, associated with children's specific, occupational

situation. In Central America, more than half the children who chose ‘school only’ as the best option were from the three farm worker groups in Guatemala. One girl said:

It’s the best way to become somebody in life, work should be left for after when one is more responsible.

In Bangladesh, where few participants had the opportunity to attend school, none saw ‘school only’ as a realistic choice, while 24 percent favoured ‘work only’. Twelve out of these 17 participants were boys working in the embroidery and sari weaving workshops in the informal sector. These boys and their families were committed to long working hours that would make schooling impractical:

Considering our present family situation we have no choice but to work now. . . . *Mohajon* will not allow us to take a few hours off for studies. . . . After working the whole day, I don’t feel like coming home and starting to study. I would not be able to concentrate.

The situation of sex workers offers the strongest example of the way an occupational situation constrains working children’s options. These young people feel their occupation stigmatizes them and makes attending school impossible. All favoured ‘only work’:

School and work will not go together because if we go to school as well as work, at school students and teachers will insult us and abuse us and so we cannot attend.

In summary, young people in these groups reflect on their circumstances, and consider the options available to them. The great majority value the opportunity of schooling, but they do not see this as an alternative to working – in their present circumstances. Earlier, I drew attention to the way work is framed negatively and school positively in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Arguably, from the children’s point of view the Convention would have been more balanced if it acknowledged that hazardous work is not the only context that can be ‘harmful to the child’s health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development’. In some circumstances, children may experience aspects of their schooling in similar terms.

## Conclusion

In this article I have presented some evidence from a study into how children perceive the place of work in their lives. To reiterate a point made at the outset, studying children’s perspectives is not a substitute for conventional evaluation research. Medical, social and psychological research is urgently required to identify the way multiple dimensions of ‘work’ relate to specific indicators of health, psychosocial adjustment and educational achievement. Children’s perspectives offer an essential, additional perspective on these processes, from the children’s point of view. The ‘pathological’ model of

'work harming development' that dominates research, and is echoed in the framing of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 32, is much less appropriate for studying the personal experiences of the young workers themselves. For children, work is an activity into which they have been initiated by parents, employers or peers, and over which they have varying levels of control. Some have been coerced, but the majority have not – not at least any more than children throughout the world who are required to comply with adult expectations over many areas of their lives, notably schooling. For the most part, they see their work as an inevitable and necessary part of growing up, as a contribution to their family and their future prospects. Work is situated within the context of cultural norms and expectations in which children's contribution is valued by their parents even though it may be low status within the wider society.

As this study has illustrated, many children have a well-developed appreciation of many of the hazards of their work, as well as the benefits. They are articulate about their difficulties and the ways their situation could be improved. They recognize their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse and the stigma that is associated with some occupations. Not all children are articulate, but they are no less aware of their situation, and they are able to make judgements about how their own occupation compares with the other kinds of work that children do, and explain the reasons for their views. They also recognize the potential value of education, but in many cases see the school opportunities currently available as a mixed blessing. Few of these children would see exclusion from the workforce as a solution to their problems. Indeed, when groups were asked how they would react to a new law, preventing children under the age of 15 from working, only 28 percent of the groups talked about the possibility of their complying with such regulations; 65 percent of the groups talked about defying the law, evading regulations, or working 'underground' (elaborated in Woodhead, 1998a).

Instead of 'removal' from work and 'rehabilitation', these groups seek support and regulation of their current situation, to help them to survive and be healthy, grow, learn and gain self-respect, and spend their remaining childhood years in conditions that give time for work, play and learning. As the major stakeholder, children's perspectives should be especially influential in the 'child labour debate'. This is consistent with 'the views of the child being given due weight' (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12), and it also recognizes that children are a major source of evidence about how work is shaping their lives.

One of the recurring themes in children's accounts of their working lives is the importance of maintaining social relationships and self-esteem. Children talk about feeling proud of what they do, and they talk about feeling shamed by the treatment of others. These more psychological effects of work are not so much about the activity itself, as about the context in which it takes place, especially the way children are treated, and the way they are

talked about. Working children (like all children) are deeply sensitive to what others say about them. Negative labels, degrading treatment, humiliation and verbal abuse are all very hurtful, whether this comes from employers, customers, parents, teachers, police or the mass media. There is even a danger that insensitive public debate can contribute to the process. The discourse of researchers and policy-makers, the language of child labour regulation and the strategies of practical intervention filter down to the children themselves. Having their own lives described in terms of 'social deprivation', 'lost childhoods' or a 'socially toxic' environment does little to help these children, especially if they can see no means of escape. Today's working children seek respect and support, not condemnation and harassment. In situations where 'removal' and 'rehabilitation' is justified in children's best interests (ILO, 1998), monitoring the impact on children and their families is essential, as is the provision of appropriate education, training and working opportunities, in ways that are consistent with local circumstances and in ways that are sustainable. For interventions to be effective, working children must be enabled to feel they are active participants, not passive victims.

This article has been about present-day childhoods – about the perspectives of working children whose development (in terms of skills, social networks, self-esteem and identity) is embedded within working lives. But social policy (at local, national and international level) is about planning for the future as well as about responding to the present. Childhood is not static, nor is it narrowly prescribed. Each generation reconstructs childhood, structuring children's experiences and channelling human potential to reflect its own goals, values and circumstances.

For millennia, childhood socialization throughout most of the world was dominated by the necessity of early initiation into tangible contributions to family and community. These priorities were reflected in the way child development was conceptualized and valued by parents (LeVine and White, 1986). Currently, high value is being placed on conceptualizing child development in terms of play and decontextualized learning, through the language- and literacy-saturated medium of the school. This is (relatively speaking) a very recent phenomenon and the resultant tensions between 'traditional' and 'modern' conceptions of childhood are in many ways inevitable. They are being felt most acutely in Majority World contexts – 'developing countries' where economic and social change as well as urbanization have been the most rapid, and where it is most difficult to ensure that quality schooling is both available to all and that it yields tangible benefits for all (e.g. Oloko, 1994). At the same time, it is worth bearing in mind that even the most widely accepted orthodoxies about childhood are not immutable. On the contrary, there are already signs that key features of schooled childhoods are being reconstructed in the most economically advanced societies as a result of innovations in information and communications technology, as well as changes in the nature of work. In short, the

shape of future childhoods, and the place of school and work within those childhoods, is far from certain.

In planning for these uncertain futures, the premise of this article is equally relevant. Current generations of children and young people have their own role to play, whether they are working or not. As future parents, what do they think will be in 'the best interests' of their own offspring? What place do they think work should have in their children's future, in view of their circumstances and the opportunities (or lack of opportunities) available? Most importantly, what do they believe can be done to build a better future for their children?

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