



## CHILD WORK: A LITERATURE REVIEW OF ACADEMIC LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT

This paper provides a review of the academic and scientific literature focused on child work since January 2000 till January 2011 (inclusive). In order to analyze the international scientific production on child work were examined original papers containing the strings “child/children work”, “child/children labour”, “adolescent/s work”, “adolescents’ labour” either in the title, or in the text or as descriptors. Papers considered had been published in psychological, sociological and educational journals and mentioned in international databases such as: PsycInfo, CSA Worldwide Political Science Abstracts, ERIC, CSA Social Services Abstracts, CSA Sociological Abstracts. Such search strategy identified a total of 301 papers. The results of the review suggest that child work has been mainly observed in developing countries or in contexts highly affected by poverty and social exclusion. Knowledge on this issue is still far to be exhaustive and the recurring approaches lack both of common and shared theories and models. The review highlights a range of problems in drawing a firm conclusion on the abolitionist approach towards child work.

**Key words:** Child work, child labour; adolescents’ work; adolescents’ labour; children’s work; children’s labour.

### 1. BACKGROUND: FACTS AND FIGURES ON CHILD WORK

The numbers and figures on working children are still very high, despite the fact that the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that between 2004 and 2008 there has been a 5.3% reduction in the number of economically active children. According to the International Labour Office, in the year 2008 there were 306 million minors aged 5-17 involved in economic activities, which is 19.3% of the same age population. 70% of them were involved in some kind of inadequate activity, because either they are too young to work, or too young to perform a specific kind of activity they are performing, or are engaged in activities that might damage their moral or their physical or psychological integrity (ILO, 2010). Economically advanced countries are not free of child work. The ILO estimates that in western countries there are about 1.7 million working children aged 10-14 years as well as 11.5 million working adolescents aged 15-17 (Dorman, 2001). This data clearly



demonstrate that the perception of child work as a phenomenon affecting only developing countries is a widespread and common prejudice.

It is important to underline that child work is not always illegal. The laws and the rules may vary from Country to Country, but there is always an age threshold, which establish the minimum age that minors must reach before being admitted to work. This means that minors who are above the age threshold but still not eighteen years old, may legally work. The most authoritative international instrument in this field is the ILO Convention n.138 on the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment. According to it, the threshold age has to be identified when the minors end the compulsory schools attendance, therefore pass from childhood to adolescence. This age threshold is commonly identified at 15 years old, but developing countries may lower it to 14 years. In addition, in exceptional situation, children below this age and not younger than 12 years old, may be employed in light works, provided that such activities do not jeopardize neither their education nor their psychological, moral and physical health. ILO Convention n. 138 furthermore allows adolescents aged 15-17 to work, provided that some specific criteria are met: not involvement in heavy or dangerous work or any kind of activities that might compromise his/her moral or psycho-physical development, a limited number of working hours, possibility to receive a proper education.

The ILO made a distinction among child work (acceptable under certain circumstances), child labour (or exploitation) and hazardous work (extremely dangerous and detrimental forms of work, which requires immediate action from Governments in order to eradicate them, such as: slavery-like practices; direct involvement in armed conflicts; pornographic or other sexual activities) (Hagermann et al., 2006). In theory, the distinction between child work and child labour is quite clear, but the operationalization of these concepts is quite difficult, due to cultural, historical and social differences.

Attitudes and policies endorsed on child work have been mainly oriented towards the elimination (either immediate or gradual) of this phenomenon, though since the second half of the '80s a new research strand emerged, as a result of a different approach to this issue. The movements of working children in developing countries, revindicating their right to work, offered some important reflections. These movements operate a distinction between exploitation and work; the former should always be fought while the latter is to be accepted and monitored. According to this approach, work does not consist only in a mean to lessen poverty, but it also enables children to participate to the family life, and it represents an occasion of work socialization and to achieve autonomy as well.

On the other hand, according to those who follow the abolitionist approach, the only admitted forms of work should be light work, related exclusively to performing duties in the day-to-day family life or, at most, to help carry out the economic activities ran by the parents of the children. The abolitionist approach considers school/study and work as two opposing and mutually exclusive experiences. Most Unions and Governments of western countries mainly share this point of view. Abolitionists of child work tend to condemn and reject the work performed by a minor, grounding their position on the risk of jeopardizing the education and, more generally, the psychological, physical and moral development of the children .

## 2. WHICH KNOWLEDGE HAS ACADEMIC RESEARCH BUILT ON CHILD WORK?

Child work is an issue for Non Governmental Organizations, Trade Unions, Governments, Intergovernmental agencies such as ILO and UNICEF, politicians, Human rights activists. On the other hand, in spite of the worldwide widespread presence of child work, working children seem to constitute a relatively invisible reality in the academic and scientific literature, that underestimate the relevance of this issue (Grier, 2004). Our aim is therefore to better understand what is literature



about, what is drawing more attention and what less, where are the clusters and where are the gaps among the state-of-the-art research carried out in the academic field. In section 3 we present the review strategy and in section 4 we present the results of the review. In section 5 we consider some implications of the findings.

### 3. METHOD: REVIEW STRATEGY

In order to analyze the international scientific production on child work we looked for original papers containing the strings “child/children work”, “child/children labour”, “adolescent/s work”, “adolescents’ labour” either in the title, or in the text or as descriptors. We searched through the following databases: PsycINFO, CSA Worldwide Political Science Abstracts, ERIC, CSA Social Services Abstracts, CSA Sociological Abstracts. Since the primary focus was on the academic and scientific literature, the papers issued by Inter-governmental agencies such as ILO and Unicef as well as papers issued by Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) were not considered, unless quoted in the searched databases. Papers were also excluded from analysis if: did not contain original data; or: did not deal with economic activities developed by minors, since the string “child work” can be referred also to child therapy; or: did not deal with minors (people younger than 18 years old), while papers dealing with people both under and over 18 were considered. This choice was made because national laws and rules as well as international instruments (such as ILO Convention n. 138, the International Convention on Children’s Rights) treat and consider people under 18 in a different way from those who are aged 18 or over.

Papers published between January 2000 - January 2011 (inclusive) were considered. It seemed to be appropriate to start the search from the year 2000 because in July 1999 the ILO approved the International Convention 182, concerning the prohibition and immediate action for the elimination of the worst forms of child work. The approval of this instrument created interest in the issue of child work not only in the mass media, Non Governmental Organizations and Governments, but also in the academic world.

We are aware that English language literature might be non completely exhaustive of the available academic literature on child work, given for instance the relevant presence of child work in non-English-speaking countries, such as the Latin American countries, where many research reports are produced also in languages other than English. Therefore we assumed that literature review carried out on international databases still offer a reliable picture of the state-of-the-art of the researches and studies on child work. In addition, databases considered offered also (though limited) access to papers also in languages other than English.

This search strategy identified a total of 301 papers, analysed by two independent judges.

The following research questions guided the review: a) Which are the topics, the aspects and the problems more addressed when researching child work and which were the most relevant conclusion they drove; b) Which are the most critical areas still in need of clarification and which ones are still underdeveloped.

Seven broad headings were used to analyze the content of the papers, which emerged from the analysis as the more recurrent as well as the more critical ones: 1) Child work: where, when, and which types; 2) Causes and consequences of child labour; 3) Relationship between school and work; 4) Limits of knowledge and approaches towards child work; 5) Limits of past and present interventions on child work.

Of course, many of the themes may interact with one another. In some cases we present results that can be found in the papers but which do not form the main focus of the author(s)’ own analyses.



## 4. REVIEW RESULTS

### 4.1. Child work: where, when, which types are under scrutiny?

The 74.75% (N=225) of the papers observes child work in a specific geographical area. The 80% (N=180) of them (that is 59.80 % of the whole group of examined papers) deals with developing or less developed countries, according to classification adopted by the United Nations Developing Programme (UNDP) (2009). More extensively, within the 26.57 % (N=80) of the papers referring to child work in high income countries, the 7,97% (N=24) of them studies this phenomenon among migrants or ethnics minorities or indigenous groups, that is among less privileged groups. More in details, the two regions that outnumber the rest of the world are Asia (N=53; 17.60% of all the examined papers) and Africa (N=52; 17.27%). At the second place there are Northern America (N=46; 15.28%) and Latin America (N=25; 8.30% ). Those regarding Europe (N=15; 4.98%) and are fewer, while in the last place we find the Arabic Countries (N=10; 3.32%). If one considers all the papers dealing with developing or less developed countries, migrants or minority groups and contexts affected by poverty, it can be noticed that the percentage of researches and studies carried out in situation of economic deprivation is very high (N=204; 78.94%).

The 34.88% (N=105) of papers deals with severe and unacceptable forms of child labour. More specifically, 29.56% (N=89) of the papers observes child work from the perspective of economic exploitation or very bad work conditions, such as street work (5.31; N=16). A minority though significant percentage (N=65; 21.59%), examines types of child work identified by the ILO Convention 182 as economic activities to be urgently eradicated because they are dangerous for the child, such as: slavery or economic activities similar to slavery, involvement of children in pornographic activities or prostitution; traffic of human beings, child soldiers.

Papers dealing with adolescents who work (aged 14-18), regardless whether they are considered or not with younger children (under 14), are a strict minority (N=13; 4.31%).

### 4.2 Causes and consequences of a minor's work

Factors mainly quoted and considered as highly correlated to the widespread diffusion of child exploitation are in order: a) Poverty (that forces families to send children to work in order to survive (e.g. Harper et al., 2003); b) Inefficacy or inadequacy of school systems (which makes school an uninteresting and not rewarding option or even pushes children out of school because of their low educational attainment (e.g. Bass, 2003); c) Lack of proper social intervention or structures (which could sustain children and their families to reduce consequences of families' or communities' distress (e.g. Plummer et al., 2007); d) Inadequacy of legislation and its endorsement (e.g. Polakoff, 2007); e) Families in condition of social distress, low parent's level of education or their inability to take proper care of the children (Degirmencioglu et al., 2008); f) Presence of cultural values and traditions that accept or even promote child work (e.g. Spence, 2006); g) Economic dynamics that promote child work, nationally or internationally. (e.g. Mukhopadhyay, 2002).

Nevertheless, the weight of each factor in promoting child work and how it interacts with the others is far to be clear, especially within the observation of different geographical contexts. Despite the fact that more than one third of papers (N=103; 34.21%) deals with the relationship between child work and poverty, it emerges that more strictly economic factors (such as low income of parents, direct and indirect costs associated with school attendance) do not always force the minors to work. More likely the impact of economic factors seem to be moderated by other factors such as: the positive or negative assessment of the quality of the education; the perception of the future opportunities offered by the schooling system; values and traditions embedded in the family as well as in the socio-cultural environment; presence of widespread work opportunities for minors (see e.g. Hussain & Maskus, 2003; Kim, 2009).



Very few researches approach this issue through the motivations given by children to explain why they work. Nonetheless, in a research carried in Nigeria based on interviews with working children, it came out that these children consider work as a way to reach economic independency, to help their family and to get trained for the adult life (Omokhodion et al., 2006). The choice to work can be also related with the wish to develop meaningful experiences, to fight boredom and gain independence, as emerged from a research carried out in UK (McKechnie et al., 2000).

As far as the negative consequences of child work, researchers tend to focus on school dropouts rates and poor school results (N=43; 14.28%); as well as on the deterioration of children's health (N=40; 13.28%) (e.g. Borrás Llop, 2005; Roggero et al., 2007). Other negative consequences of child work, though less quoted, are: jeopardizing the future well-being of children (N=17; 5.64%) mental or psychological illnesses (N=14; 4.65%); lack of free time (N=6; 1.99%) and lack of proper socialization (N=3; 0.99%) (Bourdillon, 2005; Fekadu et al., 2006; Schultz & Taylor, 2006).

On the other hand, a group of researches (N=37; 12.29 %) points out that work could constitute a positive experience for the child, since not all the economic activities carried by a minor are dangerous or hazardous for his/her life. Child work can be a meaningful experience, because it represents a way to participate to the family's life, as well as to share parts of responsibility for the cure and safeguard of the child's own family (e.g. Montoya, 2006). Work is perceived by both families and minors as a way to get trained to adulthood and as a transmission of values and representations of the world from parents to their children (Bray, 2003). Furthermore, to work can be an important opportunity of socialization and informal education as well as to nurture forms of work socialization (Neufeld et al., 2002). Moreover, working experiences can help children to gain autonomy in their economic behaviour (Iversen, 2002).

#### **4.3 Relation between school and work.**

About one fourth of the papers deals with the relationship between school and work (N=79; 26.24 %). This aspect frequently recurs in the abolitionist approaches to work performed by a minor. Work can jeopardize school attendance and success, since the commitment and physical exhaustion it implies (Duncan & Bowman, 2008). In some situations school might represent per se an uninteresting choice, because of the poor quality of education or because the access to school services is too difficult or too expensive for the family (Duryea & Arends-Kuenning, 2003). Several researches have shown that school dropout rates are more related to the lack of future opportunities, to which education is supposed to aim at, rather than the choice of work itself (Punch, 2004). The cost-benefit evaluation of education in terms of present and future economic returns plays a relevant role when a family decide send his/her child to work and not send him to school (Emerson & Souza, 2003). A further element, emerged to be significant in determining school dropout by a working child, is the kind and the extensivity of performed activities. As a research lead in Portugal points out, work hinders educational success, while light domestic work does not appear to be harmful (Goulart & Arjun, 2008), though other researches proved that extensive and not protected domestic work might develop into slavery-like practices (Blagbrough, 2008).

Several researches demonstrate that school and work are not necessarily mutually excluding each other (Robles & Abler, 2002). Besides, as it has already been demonstrated by researches quoted previously, sometimes to carry out a job can help the schooling of a minor, if this helps to pay his/her school expense. According to this issue, some researchers underlined the opportunity of making work compatible with school, for instance allowing students to work part time or organizing school time in flexible ways, considering the discontinuity and fragmentation of minors'work (Suryahadi et al., 2005).

#### **4.4 Limits of knowledge and approaches towards child work.**

Several authors underline the inadequacy of knowledge built up to now on child work or criticize the approaches adopted towards this issue. The absence of a clear, shared definition of what is



to be considered as “child work” is a serious obstacle to a proper knowledge as well as to the implementation of effective policies (Otis et al., 2001). For instance, more efforts should be paid to reach deeper knowledge on work performed at home, since very often it is not recognised by official statistics on child work, making it even it less visible and therefore less protected than the economic activities performed outside (Mansoor, 2006).

Another group of studies (N=54; 17.54%) underlines the relevance of cultural or historical aspects that intervene in determining the threshold of acceptability of child work not only according to the families, the children and the social context, but also to the researchers (Nanjunda & Annapurna, 2006). In fact, when approaching child work, what is conceptualized in terms of work, childhood and its care, play a determinant role (Qvortrup, 2003). Robson (2004) underlines that researches on minors are mainly developed in the western countries and therefore do not take into the proper account the reality of the developing countries, overlooking the reality of the working children.

A number of researchers underline that the social and cultural stigma on child work affects in a strong way the visibility this phenomenon, and therefore the gathering of data and information on it, as well as making more difficult to monitor and regulate what is happening.

#### **4.5 Limits of past and present interventions on minors' work.**

A group of researches underlines inadequacy and inefficacy of policies and interventions developed up to now on child work. Several authors suggest the opportunity of adopting policies and programmes developed by Governments, but taking into account the specific social, economic and cultural context of each country, as well as involving Non Governmental Organizations, families and working children in their implementation (e.g. Baker & Hinton, 2001).

According to Leonard (2004), the best solution to this issue is not to protect the children, prohibiting them to work or reducing as much as possible the time they spend doing it. Instead, it would be more productive to help the children to develop those abilities to properly deal with their work experiences. More in general, economic sanctions or boycott aimed at reducing child work often fail their goal. Some researchers underline that many programmes endorsed to fight child work turned up as unsuccessful or even worsened children's situations, as it happened in Bangladesh, where the fear of economic sanctions from the USA forced many children to leave their work and pushed them into more difficult working conditions (Nielsen, 2005). The application of social clauses on international transactions might have effects on some of the worst forms of exploitation, but could not have significant impact on the number of working children, since only the 5% of them works producing exporting goods (Kuschneret, 2001).

Other researchers go further on, saying that it is necessary to question the reprehensive intervention up to now adopted to face child work (Invernizzi, 2003). They think that the abolitionist approach towards child work is too simplistic and propose instead to monitor this phenomenon taking into consideration both negative and positive aspects of child work, while supporting working children in defending their rights (Jaquemin, 2002). Those who share this position affirm that is impossible to endorse general principles without taking into consideration relevant differences among different cultural, social and economic contexts.

As a matter of fact, the prohibition to work might eliminate an important opportunity of training and informal education or could turn into a not sustainable option (Liebel, 2002). Bhukuth & Ballet (2006) carried a research among minors who work in the brick industry in India, where whole family groups are involved in this work. They noticed that keeping the children away from work would worsen poverty of children's families, pushing their families into debt slavery. Punch (2003) in fact suggests the adoption of a more holistic approach, where school and work can be combined together.



## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis performed shows how child work is observed in the vast majority of cases in contexts connoted by low economic development, exploitation, negative conditions of work, social risks, violence. In other studies, these conditions are such to compromise per se the physical, psychological and moral development of the children involved. The kinds of activities that are under scrutiny in these researches are related to poverty, exploitation, injustice, physical and psychological abuses, inadequate or risky conditions. In other words, minors' work is mainly observed from the perspective of its negative consequences, and in conditions such to compromise per se the physical, psychological and moral development of the children involved. This strong attention paid to negative aspects of performing an economic activity by a minor can be explained also with the fact that research and studies on working minors observe mainly very young children or pre-adolescents, while working adolescents are quite often neglected by academic research. Vice versa, the forms of work performed by minors living in western, economically developed countries or generally by minors who are not neglected or live in a situation of social exclusion and poverty, do not seem to be addressed in depth by the academic literature.

A closer observation of child work in these contexts confirm that not every form of economic activity performed by a minor is to be condemned. Some researchers have already demonstrated that performing a light work, in line with international and national laws and compatible with the school and free choice of a minor, may turn into an opportunity of economic and work socialization, as well as in the possibility to become more independent, responsible and to build a positive image of oneself. In addition, very little attention is paid to forms of child work which are dangerous too, but are not socially perceived as such, like the work in show business and in the sport (see e.g. Brackenridge, 2004).

Up to now we do not have sufficient and shared knowledge to identify what is child work: the doubt around unpaid work and domestic work is still to be resolved. We do not know enough about child work in order to be able to identify which criteria and measurement should be applied to reach a clear and unquestionable threshold between acceptable and unacceptable forms of child work. A criterion that might help to take a further step towards this direction might be considering as acceptable those economic activities performed by an adolescent, that are not dangerous or detrimental for his/her physical, moral and psychological development, and could be compatible with his/her school and study. In this perspective, school can play a positive role supporting, rather than contrasting, working minors; for instance, school might offer training and information on issues related to health, safety and rights of workplaces as well as on norms and laws regulating work. Therefore, it would be useful and urgent to further investigate which criteria and conditions should be applied in order to make it possible for an adolescent to combine school attendance and study with a job, what are the consequences on the quality of life and well-being of adolescents who carry out a job without being forced or performing inadequate activities and which criteria should be used to identify forms of work which can be defined as "light" and therefore not dangerous or detrimental for the adolescent, while taking into consideration his/her age.

In order to endorse more effective programs and intervention on child work, it might help to adopt a "context focused" approach, that takes into account cultural, economic and social aspects intervening in determining sets and shaping the phenomenon of child work. It has to be underlined, however, that a cultural or "context focused" approach to better understand child work it is not per se sufficient to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable forms of child work. In fact, cultural motivations are sometimes used to justify or to promote severe forms of child work, such as the domestic exploitation of girls turned into slavery as in the case of the Devadasi girls (Orchard, 2007).



Undoubtedly, knowing what working children think and perceive about their work may integrate our knowledge on child work and maybe can help adults to shape a more realistic approach to it. Several researches have proven adolescents to be competent subjects, able to autonomously express their evaluation and their point of view on their working experience. Opinions and perspectives of working children are relevant also because policies and interventions endorsed on child work cannot avoid to involve those who are directly interested in such issues: that is to say, family and children. On the contrary, only a small group of the papers examined papers (41 papers; 13.62%) were based on the collection of data and information directly from working children. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that this group of researches shows that the perspectives of working children tend to be more positive and favourable to child work than expected.

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