

Participation and Protagonism make children and youth stronger and more competent. Experiences from movements of working children and youth worldwide

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Resumen

La violencia entre y contra los jóvenes, incluyendo la explotación, es un tema preocupante en todo el mundo. Además de combatir la violencia y sus causas, es necesario atender los aspectos vinculados con la resiliencia a la violencia. Apoyar a los jóvenes para que tengan mayor control de sus propias vidas les dará herramientas para desarrollar relaciones constructivas entre sí y evitar la violencia de los adultos. Según la Convención sobre los Derechos del Niño, los *menores* de 18 años también tienen derechos civiles y políticos, como la libertad de expresión, pensamiento y religión y protección de la privacidad. Este trabajo presenta ideas para integrar la participación o el protagonismo en las políticas hacia los niños; muestra cómo los jóvenes se solidarizan entre sí mediante su participación activa en grupos de interés. Percibir a los jóvenes como seres capaces y talentosos podría llevar a aceptarlos como ciudadanos responsables y competentes.

Palabras claves: violencia, jóvenes, derechos del niño, participación, niños trabajadores.

Abstract

Violence among youth and violence against youth including various forms of exploitation-is a major concern around the world. In addition to addressing issues directly connected with violence and the causes of violence, it is necessary to look at aspects relating to resilience against violence. Supporting young people to take an active role in their own lives, for instance through *protagonism* will make them better equipped to develop constructive relationships among themselves, and to avoid being subject to violence and exploitation from adults.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child firmly states that also persons *below* the age of 18 enjoy important civil and political rights. These rights

include the right to freedom of expression, the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, protection of their privacy and freedom of association. With reference to examples where working children and youth have organised themselves and spoken out on their rights as children and workers, this paper presents some thoughts about how the notion of children's participation or *protagonism* could be integrated into mainstream policy and programming for children. It will show how young people become stronger and develop solidarity among themselves through taking active part in their own interest groups. The paper will also raise issues related to the changed roles of children and adults vis-à-vis each other in the perspective of the Convention. A changed attitude towards young people as resourceful and capable could also create a better basis for accepting children and youth as responsible and competent citizens.

Keywords: violence, young people, children's right, participation, working children.

Introduction

Violence among youth and violence against youth -including various forms of exploitation- is a major concern around the world. In addition to addressing issues directly connected with violence and the causes of violence, it is necessary to look at aspects relating to resilience against violence. Supporting young people to take an active role in their own lives, for instance through participation and *protagonism*¹ will make them better equipped to develop constructive relationships among themselves, and to avoid being subject to violence and exploitation from adults.

I have studied examples where working children and youth have organised themselves and spoken out for their rights as children and workers. This gives some insight in what 'participation rights'² could be understood to mean, and some of the challenges that we encounter when children actively make use of their rights. The experience -and strength- gained by the young workers might give us some ideas about what makes children and youth resilient and more competent, but also more able to involve in positive and constructive activities. Many of the young people involved in these organisations are daily subject to violence and could easily be pulled into violent actions among themselves or against others. We should not forget that work related exploitation of children is a serious form of structural violence in many societies world-wide.

¹ From Spanish: 'Protagonismo'.

² See for instance: y and Kaufman, 1997; Franklin, 1998; Hart et al., 1997b; Kjørholt, 1998; Ochaíta & Espinosa, 1997; West, 1997.

One of the organisations, *Manthoc*³ in Peru, introduced the term *protagonism* to stress the interactive and responsibility-taking aspects of participation. The word is now being increasingly used in English, with the meaning it carries in Spanish to underscore some of the associations normally not linked with participation, such as a capacity to take part actively in the definition of the choices of a given community.⁴ To take this a bit further, one could say that protagonism means partnership (Miljeteig, in press).

Taking a child rights perspective

The whole text of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the spirit behind it establishes an exhaustive framework for protecting children from *any kind of exploitation*. In addition to stating the unalienable rights of the child to survival and development, and to the full development of every child's potential, CRC offers several principles that promote the child's well-being and integration into society.

CRC also reiterates that persons *below* the age of 18 enjoy central civil and political rights previously laid out by other UN human rights treaties, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. That means to accept that children are capable of having opinions, that these should be listened to and taken seriously into consideration. It also implies that children can act on their own, take action to protect their own interests, and act as *stakeholders* in efforts to address their situation. In several countries around the world working children and youth have actively made use of their rights to form organisations and demand to be heard in the child labour discourse. Are we—for instance—ready to take them seriously as *partners* in the further efforts to address the problems connected to child labour?

Working children and youth organising themselves

The very vocal and visible entry onto the scene of working children and youth, who speak out on their rights, including their right to be heard in the debate has created several reactions. It has taken most of us by surprise, and it has created some uneasiness because we are not really used to dealing with young people and their direct language. In some cases, young workers have

³ Movimiento de niños y Adolescentes Hijos de Obreros Cristianos.

⁴ See for instance, also Cussianovich, 1997; Sanz, 1997; Swift, 1999; Tolfree, 1998; Torres, 1994.

caused particularly strong reactions, because they have made claims for their 'right to work' and the right to be respected as workers. Statements from international gatherings of working children and youth are very straightforward in their language and not easy to respond to with clear answers (Dakar, 1998; Kundapur, 1996).

Overviews of organisations of working children and youth show that they have many things in common.⁵ Firstly, they share a strong foundation in an activist approach that primarily aims to support empowerment of poor or otherwise marginalised and disadvantaged people. They are focussing on workers' rights and poverty reduction. They furthermore have in common a strong grassroots nature, with little trust in government and formal structures. They have all grown gradually and spontaneously from small initiatives. Even if they have large numbers of members, their main organisational units are small, local groups. It would probably be more appropriate to label them as *movements* rather than organisations in the strict sense. This is also how they seem to perceive themselves, and in consistence with the way they grow to include several communities, states and countries in a region. They have also developed successful ways of working closely with their adult supporters. They share important characteristics of democratic organisations in terms of the importance paid to election to offices and to representivity of those who speak on behalf of the organisations. Some of them have introduced membership cards as a means to identify and protect their members, and to gain acceptance as workers. Another remarkable thing is the effective international networking among working children's organisations globally with several international gatherings of representatives from the various movements.

A common goal for the organisations is to support the members in their daily lives. This is typically done through small focussed discussion groups. Here, they share their thoughts about the situation they are in, what kind of problems they meet in their work situations, and how to deal with the daily hassles. Joining others who are in the same situation creates a sense of belonging, self esteem, and it creates group solidarity. Many of the members are young people who work in the informal sector -for example as domestics- and work in isolation from others of their age. These young people are particularly prone to exploitation, and need to learn about their rights and possibilities. Particularly Manthoc —in

⁵ For more detailed accounts of individual organisations and their histories see: Swift (1999); Tolfree (1998). The organisations from which I have drawn my examples are Manthoc and the Latin American movement of working children and youth; Enda-Jeunesse Action and the West African movement of working children and youth; MNMMR – The National Movement of Street Boys and Girls (Brazil); Bhima Sangha (India).

the Latin American context— has paid great importance to providing young workers with a sense of dignity associated with the work, and being able to make a living from decent work. They believe that those who achieve better understanding about their situation as children or adolescents, as workers and as citizens, will also be better able to protect themselves from exploitation and seek less harmful types of work. For that reason Manthoc has made it a specific part of its philosophy to promote an educational approach that is focussed on giving information about the society within which the young workers live, and promoting skills that are useful in their particular situation (*formación*). For the same reason, most of them have paid great importance to disseminating information widely among their members and externally.

In some cases, *informal training* in literacy and vocational skills is organised within the smaller units of the organisations. Sometimes it is as basic —and effective— as those who have reading and writing skills sharing it with those who do not. The Senegalese Movement of Working Children and Youth has given importance to teaching their members French, the official language of the country, to enable them to reach beyond this local language and better understand what is going on in their society. Working children's groups in West Africa have also successfully negotiated access to classrooms for literary classes after hours (Mali). To address *health concerns*, they have collaborated with local health services to set up a scheme whereby working children can seek consultation at the hospital at the same price as school children (Cote d'Ivoire) or set up a mutual savings scheme for health care (Senegal). In Senegal, young workers have also organised joint purchases of material they need for their work, for instance as shoe shiners.

Both at community and national level, the organisations have worked to *influence legislation* relating to children and youth in general, or more specifically to child labour. Examples of this could be found in Peru and India. The most striking and well-publicised example, though, is probably how the National Movement of Street Boys and Girls in Brazil significantly influenced the inclusion of a reference to children's rights in the new constitution and the drafting of a national legislation on children and youth in the late 1980s (Gomes da Costa and Schmidt-Rahmer, 1991). Working children's organisations have participated in local child rights campaigns, and established partnerships for instance with local NGOs and trade unions.

The young workers who have gathered for instance at their international meetings in Kundapur (1996)⁶ or in Dakar (1998)⁷, or sent their representatives to large international conferences, presented themselves as quite different from what one is used to expect of child laborers. They gave coherent presentations of their situations, what has led them into the work that they are doing, the problems and hassles that they face on a daily basis, and how they are trying to relate to all of this. Furthermore, the presented ideas and opinions about what needs to be done, and gave warnings about the well-intended, but not carefully thought out, efforts from the international community to 'solve' the 'child labour problem'. Their clear message is that child workers can no longer be seen exclusively as *passive recipients* of protection and special services. They are able to *take action* to improve their situation, and should consequently be consulted and involved in the development of measures to assist them.

At international meetings and conferences, the awkwardness around including the young representatives in the regular proceedings of such meetings has been very obvious. The young people are not familiar with the formal setting and protocol. The other participants are not used to dealing with young people in this setting. Nor do they seem to be comfortable with the language and impatience of the young people.

One of the critical views against such participation states that these children and youngsters are not representative of working children. 'How can they represent *all* working children!' 'Some of them are not even *children* any longer!' are among the typical comments. To the first one, on representativity, technically they can of course not speak on behalf of *all* working children. However, the organisations they come from have been through very careful processes to identify who should represent them in the various meetings. That they sometimes use generalised phrases when they talk, should not be judged more harshly than in other instances when people make general statements. On the question of *age*, it is correct that some of the spokespersons for working children are above 18. Again, it should be noted that they have been elected by the organisations to speak on behalf of them. Some of them have a history as child workers, and have continued to work for the issue. That should be seen as positive, and not be used against them.

⁶ First International Meeting of Working Children, Kundapur, India, 27 November – 9 December 1996.

⁷ International Movement of Working Children, meeting in Dakar, Senegal, March 1998

Another point that has not been raised so often —but is probably the most relevant if one wants to be critical about the *representativity*— is that the young workers who speak at international conferences or to the media, are probably the most resourceful among the young workers. In that respect, they might not be representing all their fellow workers. This should be borne in mind, so that one does not go to the other extreme and expect that same involvement from *all working* children and youth.

What makes the experience of organised working children so fascinating to observe is that these young people have not waited for an invitation to 'participate'. They have just acted on their own, and implemented their own rights in their *own way*, in some cases as a response to information about these rights. Also, they have exercised their right to freedom of association, a right that one normally does not attribute to children.

In addition to taking responsibility for themselves and others, members of the working children's organisations also exercise actively their right to *access to information*.⁸ Seeking and promoting information about issues relevant to their situation such as legislation or health care services plays an important role in the activities of organisations of working children. The philosophy is that without sufficient and relevant knowledge about their situation and the society in which they live, the working children and their families will not be able to improve their situation. If they are to have impact on policies and programmes developed by local and national governments or international organisations, they also need access to information about *how* such agencies work. Particularly, *international collaboration* is regulated by a set of intricate formal and informal rules. Without in-depth knowledge of these rules and the procedures for decision making, it is difficult to gain any direct influence.

To conclude:

The organisations of working children and youth are like *living laboratories* for participation rights and democracy. That is why they should be studied more closely to see what further lessons could be learned. I would be particularly interested in two aspects: a) Firstly, to see how these organisations work, what strategies they develop and what are their actual achievements. This would be useful for further theorising and planning concerning how to facilitate children's participation; b) Secondly, it would be interesting to know more about what

⁸ CRC Article 17

happens to the individual child or youth who gets involved in organisations for working children and youth. How does this involvement help them in their own situation, to develop coping mechanisms against exploitation? I think that such knowledge about resilience would also be useful in a more general perspective.

Looking at the experience gained by the organisations of working children and youth and their encounters with the 'adult world', I see the following challenges. They need to be addressed urgently, if we mean to take children's civil and political rights seriously.

1. First of all, we need to *establish a culture of listening to children*. As Roger Hart has put it: «Children's participation is often promoted as a «children's voices» movement, but it should equally be an «adult ears» movement» (Hart, 1998:147). This means that we are obliged to respect young people's right to have different opinions from our own, and that we are willing to examine them without prejudice. We cannot reject statements we do not like without trying to understand the reasoning behind such statements, even if they come from young persons.
2. We need to *establish a dialogue* with the young workers -a two-way communication based on respect. And, we need to examine the *language* we use. Well-intended adults and their organisations talk about abolishing child labour, making work below certain ages forbidden by law, rehabilitating child workers. Many working children and youth find this language very offensive, because they feel that such phrases do not reflect respect for them as individual human beings.
3. *Working children and youth can provide valuable information and insights about their work*, - what brings them into working situations, and how they can improve their working conditions or find ways to combine earning a necessary income with relevant and future oriented education. They can also tell us something about what works and what does not work in interventions to help them. Some programmes for working children have started to include the 'beneficiaries' as partners in the design, implementation and evaluation of their interventions. Some researchers have tried to develop ways to seek information directly from working children about how they experience their work and the impact it has on their situation.⁹ I see a great challenge in finding ways to collect such information on a systematic basis, and make use of it and value it as an important tool to improve the situation of working children and get rid of all exploitative work.

⁹ See for example Johnson et al. (1998); Tolfree (1998); Woodhead (1998).

4. We need to look more closely at what are the *roles of adults* in their interaction with children and youth. In the case of working children and youth, there will be many different roles; those of parents, employers, supporters and facilitators in working children's programmes, local authorities, representatives of local and international organisations. One central question relates to all: how far are they/we willing to regard children and young people as partners worth listening to, and people to include in our reasoning and planning? The young people are reaching out to meet us, are we ready to meet them on equal terms? Here is a lot of experience to be analysed further, in order to learn more about how children and adults can collaborate towards common goals, and about what kind of adult support is conducive for child-led activities.
5. This leads us to the unavoidable question of whether we are willing to revise our *understandings of democracy*. Are we willing to change our perceptions about who defines the 'reality' in such issues as child labour, and who makes the decisions? Are we willing to give up power and admit that sometimes young people come up with better explanations and better solutions than we do? Some writers have suggested a new model for democracy that is based on the fact that children and adults are interdependent. Such a model might provide theoretical grounds for arguing that all children carry some responsibilities and duties. This is the case that working children and youth are making. If we can accept that even the youngest members of society have the responsibility and duty to reproduce themselves, it is only fitting that the awarding of rights and citizenship should be returned. The youngest children might be more 'dependent' on some adults. This should not necessarily exclude them from citizenship as we are all in some sense or another dependent upon others, including the youngest of children (Cockburn, 1998: 113).
6. Finally, keeping in mind that treating children and youth as human beings makes them stronger, and teaches them how to trust their own capacity and ability to take responsibility for themselves and others, we need to examine and redefine the way we treat children as well as our attitudes.

