

A will of their own: Cross-cultural perspectives on working children.

Manfred Liebel (2004)

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Should children work? This is not a new question, but one that is again exigent in the context of increased exploitation of children as slaves and in other forms of child labour. Current estimates by the International Labour Organization suggest about 317 million children aged 5 to 17 work and of these, about 218 million are considered to be engaged in work that limits their access to education, and/or is dangerous to their mental, physical, social or moral wellbeing. Liebel's work is therefore a timely exploration of a very current issue.

Internationally there are two main views dominating the debate regarding children's work, one is the abolitionist approach that claims child labour should be ended and the other, that excluding children from work also excludes them from assuming positions as productive agents in society. Liebel takes a clear position that work provides important social recognition as well as economic support that is a critical part of children's development as subjects. Liebel argues that children's work should be recognized as an essential activity and at that point, it will be possible to end exploitive child labour. He suggests that work can be "a free expression of life for children" (p. 9). This position comes from a commitment to viewing children as subjects of their own lives based on their capacities to understand and act in their own best interest. Liebel deplores the invisible, and therefore, exploited position that children occupy and suggests that work is the key to making them visible.

Liebel develops his argument in eleven chapters. Chapter one examines the working children's organizations and movements that have come into view since the 1980s and he explores the important role these organizations have had in transforming understanding of children as capable social and economic subjects. In chapter two, Liebel provides a wide coverage of international trends in social research that helps to understand both the abolitionist and "children's right to work" positions. The third chapter focuses on three Latin American cases of participatory research and the development of understandings of children as social actors using a theory of social representation. Liebel concludes that the views expressed by children participating in these cases suggests that adults and children have very different views about the role and value of children's work and that children have the capacity to influence more than just their own development but can, and should be allowed to, play a significant role in society by drawing on their experience as workers. In the following two chapters, Liebel works through the issues of universalizing understandings of childhood and the problems with such attempts to assign western patterns of childhood to non-Western cultures, although he also avoids presenting any particular cultural view of children as exemplary. For Liebel, what is important is that we strive to challenge all traditional views of childhood that treat children as objects, and he continues by suggesting that the current increases in the number of working children worldwide, including Europe and other western countries suggests an alternative, and positive, new image of children as workers

is emerging. Liebel argues that it is necessary to challenge the viewpoint of children and child work as valuable for what it will bring to the child in the future and supports an understanding that work is, in the present, a valuable activity for children. Chapters eight to ten develop Liebel's argument by framing children's exploitation as grounded in misunderstandings of children's ability to be active agents as a part of the structures of capitalist societies. He argues that by investigating the socio-cultural context, the socio-economic situation of the children, the mental and psychological resources of the child, their social status, and the motivation of the children, a critical appraisal of possible exploitation of working children is possible. He concludes that providing non-exploitive work should be the key goal of this analysis.

While this book does address the themes it sets out to address, it would have been helpful to include a more thorough exploration of the institutional forces that surround children's work and the individual working child that is the focus on Liebel's analysis. For example, Liebel's "take the hazard out of the work, not the child out of the work" approach has become quite popular with international NGOs working with exploitive child labour. Both the theory and practice leave several important areas of tension that should be examined. First, to what extent is this position the logical extension of the neoliberal policy context that has facilitated economic globalization? The norms of this policy context stress the importance of individual freedom, free choice, limited state or social interference in individual lives, as well as competition and individual entrepreneurship. Supporting working children then, becomes a legitimate way of enacting these norms. Challenges to such neoliberalism come from many areas and of particular interest in this case, is the focus on the goal of universal access to quality education which is in tension with support for working children. What are the implications of promoting children's "right to work" alongside a "right to education"? Shouldn't we be concerned about positions that suggest poor children have a right to work and non-poor children have a right to education?

Despite these concerns, *A will of their own* makes an important contribution to the discourse around children's work. As Liebel suggests, understandings and practices related to working children are changing throughout the world and it is vital to begin to bring the issues, and most importantly, the voices of children into the centre of our policies and actions. Liebel's book, including its contestable passionate declarations and its silences, provides a valuable contribution to our understanding as we proceed in that direction.

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