

DEV 712

At school or work:

Who are the winners, who are the losers?

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October 22 2008

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Introduction

A 12 year old boy in a Delhi slum told me he had a vision that all the children in his colony would be able to read and write. He and his friends are tackling this problem by performing street plays in front of local vehicle dismantling businesses employing children. The play's message was "let the children go", (for three hours a day) to school. This paper will explore that message by looking at the external and internal forces that influence poor families into sending their children to work. The problems of banning child labour will be investigated along with its efficiency. The question "Is school such a good option?" will be discussed as well as that of the invisible children working at home who are "Born to work". Finally some policy implications for encouraging school attendance will be reviewed. I will contend that child labour can only be reduced by starving the conditions in which it flourishes, and that this will lead to school attendance and the breaking of the poverty cycle.

Background

In 1802 Robert Peel's Factories Act was passed in Great Britain, it was one of the first challenges to the scourge of child labour. Children (and women) were (and still are) the workers that cannot say "no". A child was recorded as saying "When I was five, my mother took me to the lace school [everything can be called a school] and gave the mistress a shilling. She learned me for half an hour, smacked my head six times." And from a "master" of the time: "Six is the best age, you can beat it into them..." (Landes, 1998 p.382). It wasn't until the 1900's that relatively comprehensive and enforced regulations began to be introduced (Chang 2003). Sen (1999) refers to the forcing of children to work as barbarous as the slave trade that received so much attention in the 19th century.

Over 200 years later, it has been estimated that there are 186 million child labourers, 5.7m in forced and bonded labour, 1.8m in prostitution and 0.3m in armed conflict (Dehejia, 2002). Robert Peel would have been distraught at the singular failure of his successors to deal with this problem (Basu, 2003). While the 19th and first part of the 20th centuries saw drops in child labour, measuring this has always been difficult. Colonisation saw much of the low paid work done

by children go to the colonies. The advent of independence of those colonial states and the associated nation building has revealed partially the extent of the problem due to the focus on “development” that has taken hold since the 1950’s.

External Forces Influencing Families

Today the task of balancing the benefits of education against having enough to eat faces pressure from outside the family compound. Global forces that have for years been conspiring to force the poor to fit into the agendas of multinational companies and first world governments. An early (New Zealand) position on the purpose of Education is referenced by Green (2006) in a section of the Introduction to the Elementary Code of 1904. The seemingly balanced quote suggests that children must fit the system.

The purpose of the Public Elementary School is to form and strengthen the character and to develop the intelligence of children entrusted to it ... in assisting both girls and boys according to their different needs, to fit themselves, practically as well as intellectually, for ... life. (p.165)

One wonders what “different needs” the writer had in mind for “both” girls and boys.

According to Charlot (2007) as early as the 1960’s education began to be viewed in vocational rather than educational terms. The concept of going to school to be able to “get a job” became the foundation for investment into education by multilateral funding agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Agreements between trading nations such as the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) brokered by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) put additional pressure on nation states to fit their education programmes into new economic and “social logics”.

These new economic and social logics transformed states from what Charlot called “Educator States” that saw education in terms of “nation building, social peace and transmitting of values” to a “Developmentalist State... placing education at the service of development”.

Korten (2001) argues that because of the pressures multinationals are able to exert, foreign aid, even grant aid has become “antidevelopmental” to the poorer

nations. The very nations that colonised the third world to gain access to their mineral and other natural resources are recolonising their human resources. Poor families who are weighing up the impact of how many of their children they can send to school will have no idea that the same huge unseen forces that control the prices of their crops have plans for their children as future workers and consumers.

Witte (2000) asserts that the education sector face demands from multinationals to be the “spearhead of modernisation and technical upgrading”. Many Education Ministries also desire to be the “Protector of national identity and traditions”. Thailand’s policy makers have put a lot of energy into trying to encourage both in its education system. They have strengthened the maths and science programmes, *and* also stressed traditional Thai values through social science *and* basic life skills curriculum. Witte states that this conflict is unlikely to ever go away, but will require ongoing negotiation by every generation and government administration. She goes on to say that for Thailand, reinforcing through education the traditional sense of national identity has actually enhanced competitiveness, social cohesion and the ability to achieve common understandings that serve to aid the nations capacity to manage technological and economic pressure to change. Their example in this area is one to be held up as a model to be emulated.

Internal Forces Influencing Families

Hsin (2005) asserts that children work only because they have to if the family income is not sufficient to meet daily needs. This takes for granted that children’s leisure and school time is a luxury that can only be enjoyed if the parent’s (full time working) income is high enough release the children from engaging in paid work. This theory is based on the widely accepted position that parents are altruistic towards their children. On the other hand Dasgupta (1995) writes “in poor countries children are also useful as income earning assets; this provides households with another motivation for procreation” (p.1895). It could be argued that this is simply motivated by short term thinking and greed. A longer term view would be that a smaller better educated family would be in a better position to care for their parents in their older years.

Hsin’s substitution axiom states that children are seen as substitutes (subject to a correction for their lesser physical output) for adults in the workplace as they are

“cheaper” and possibly easier to control. However the idea that they are “better” at some tasks (i.e. hand knotting rugs because of their nimble fingers) has largely been discounted. Even from a purely economic perspective a child will return more from an investment of a good education over their lifetime than if they are put to work early.

Mehrotra and Biggeri (2002) have studied a large number of families where children work to determine factors that increase or decrease the likelihood they will attend school. In India each increase of a year in age increases the probability of working full time by 7.5%. Having an educated mother increases the chance of going full time to school by 10.1%. If the parents own their house, the probability of going to school full time increases by 5.3%. A child with out a father is 35% more likely to work full time than those with a father. If the parents are part of a home based worker organisation, there is a 24.7% likelihood that their children will study as well as work. It could be argued that it might be easier to focus attention on improving the ability of families to increase the odds that unborn children might get into school. More will be said about this later.

Why not just ban Child Labour?

It is widely accepted that a child that attends school will have a better chance of accessing high wages when entering the work force along with the myriad of benefits that come with well developed skills of thinking, analyses and a good general knowledge. How ever Ravallion and Wodon (2000) find that simple bans on children working while difficult to enforce, can further impact affected families by depriving them of the small but significant income the children might earn. Banning child labour while logical from a human rights approach also assumes that children not working will be in school furthermore, bans can simply drive the problem out of sight underground. Baland and Robinson (2000) contend that pursuing a partial ban may be of more benefit that a complete ban on child labour.

Weiner (1991) records comments by businesses owners in India who support laws that restrict child labour for practical reasons. “One of the complaints of managers of large firms is that their labour force is not sufficiently educated, that too many workers are unable to read manuals or follow the simple instructions written on the machines” (p. 165).

Other contest that even talking about a partial ban is fraught with potential problems. Children should never be forced to work, over worked or required to work in a dangerous situation. Mill (1965) writes;

“...it is right that children should be protected from being over worked. Labouring for too many hours a day, or on work beyond their strength should not be permitted to them, for if permitted it may always be compelled. Freedom of contract, in the case of children, is but another word for freedom of coercion. Education also, the best which circumstances admit of their receiving, is not a thing which parents or relatives ... should have it in their power to withhold (p. 952).

Baland and Robinson point out that child labour bans only affect the very poor families as children from wealthy homes do not work. This results in national shifts in income distribution.

Part time work may not prevent children meeting school attendance requirements. The length of the primary school day in rural Bangladesh averages around 4 hours. This allows schools to run two shifts per day, one in the morning and one in the evening. It also allows children to spend part of the day working on their family farms while completing the required time at school. Boys in rural Bangladesh between the ages of 5-14 do an average of 26 hours a week of work. Absence from school because of working only accounts for 15% of the reasons recorded for the children failing to show up (Ravallion and Wodon, 2000).

The efficiency of child labour

Even if we can agree that part time work may be ok in some circumstances, is it worth it? Barland and Robinson (2000) question the efficiency of child labour. Their research concludes that in a perfect market with full employment and good pay rates it might be expected that parents could earn enough to compensate their children later on for their loss in earning capacity (due to working instead of being at school) through bequests. But in the resource poor environments this essay is focusing on, ideal market situations rarely exist. The children are condemned to a lifetime of low paid drudgery, and the parents miss out on their extra earning power and influence in later years when they are looking to their children for support. As the economy and relative poverty of the family

deteriorates, the situation becomes more entrenched and adults are more likely to take over those jobs that children may have engaged in. The efficiency worsens in this situation when children are not in school with its accompanying benefits.

On the other hand, there is no guarantee there will be jobs for school leavers, so the decision faced by parents is a hard one. The benefits of putting their children through school are far off and not guaranteed, the costs of schooling may result in deprivation (including malnutrition and a failure to treat illness/injury) and the income or labour on the farm gained by the child's work is lost. I assert that parents need assistance to increase their productivity in order to reduce their reliance on their children's labour.

Is school such a good option?

Delamonica, Mehrotra and Vande Moortele (2001) gloomily calculate that the goal of education for all by 2015 will not be met because primary education has failed to attract sufficient global funding. If we are considering the questions "At school or work, who are the winners, who are the losers" the assumption is that children can go to a good school. Significant extra spending is going to be required especially in Sub Saharan Africa and also in South and South Eastern Asian states if the EFA goals¹ are to be met.

In 2000 120 million children who should have been in primary school were not. 1 in 3 did not complete 5 years of primary schooling so will not be able to adequately read and write joining around 1 billion of the worlds adults. UNESCO data estimates that primary schools in developing countries will need to cater for an extra 170 million, a 30% increase. In Sub Saharan Africa twice as many places will need to be found. The cost to achieve this (over and above maintaining the status quo) is estimated by Delamonica et al to be in the region of US\$9.1 billion a year. With funding for education flat lining or dropping, difficulties reaching these targets may result in schooling not being available at all for many children. Another problem cited by Sen and Dreze (1995) is the "lack of accountability of teachers to the communities they serve giving rise to malpractice in the functioning of schools" (p.403). The mismanagement of schools, and inefficient Ministries of Education place enormous obstacles in front of children wanting to learn. One could argue that they might be better off

¹ set at the World Conference on Education for All conference held in Jomtien, Thailand in March 1990.

learning skills and traditional folk lore from their extended families than the often poor quality teaching, politically censored (colonial or religious based) curriculum children must endure in many countries.

Invisible Children: Working at home

While a lot of education does take place at home, so do most of the hours children spend working. Much of the research on Child Labour has focused on children working out of the home as this has always been easier to monitor. Mehrotra and Biggeri's (2002) research in India, Pakistan, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand has shown that a large percentage of hours worked by children happen in a family business. This offers families a number of advantages, the income, reduced travel, the ability to prepare food and generally care for the "workers" can be achieved more cost effectively at home. For those who sub contract to these home based work (hbw) households there are also many advantages. They can recruit from a large area as workers do not have to travel, they only subcontract out work when they need to, there are fewer worries about unions, no costly health and safety standards and they don't have to pay for power, tools and other means of production.

Children are easily caught up in hbw as their parents do not attract the same penalties inflicted on factories employing children. In fact it is the increase of laws banning child labour that has in many cases driven the issue underground and caused it to rise.

The relocation of poor rural people to urban areas has seen their children (who worked on family farms) switch to in informal sector activities such as manufacturing. Unfortunately, participation in labour at the expense of schooling has been shown by Mehrotra and Biggeri (2002) to precipitate an "inter-generational transfer of human poverty" (p.3).

Born to Work: Inter-generational transfers of poverty

Children do not chose the environment there are born into. It is the bargaining power the parents have in the market place that will create opportunities or condemn them to a life of drudgery with successive generations being "born to work". The necessary endowments (level of education, health, resources) a family possesses can either pass a surplus or a deficit to those following.

Increases in wealth can increase child labour in the short term, but over the medium term reduce household poverty. For example the acquisition of land may require children to work longer hours preventing them from going to school, but later, their labour can be replaced by paid workers. Again it can be asserted that assisting families today to acquire endowments that can be passed on might reduce the numbers of children being born to work.

Policy Implications for encouraging School Attendance

What are interventions that can reduce the hour children work and increase schooling? The Asian crisis of 1988 had a huge impact on the economies of many of the Asian states, their people and trading partners. But the education system in Indonesia according to Cameron (2001) seemed to have protected Indonesian's children from the brunt of the disaster. There was no great drop off in school attendance, or an increase in the numbers of children working.

The crisis cause widespread adult unemployment which placed huge stress on house holds. It could have been expected that this might have caused parents to pull their children out of school and put them to work. However schools at the time took a more lenient position with regards to parents who were having trouble paying school fees and in some cases relaxed the requirement for the children to wear uniforms. The Indonesian Government in 1988 introduced an extensive social safety net (Jaring Pengamananan Sosial, JPS) scholarship programme. Funded by the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank it targeted the poorest families of 6% of primary, 17% of lower secondary and 10% of upper secondary students. This intervention was successful in avoiding significant drop offs in school attendance rates.

Along with subsidies to enable to poorest access schooling, simultaneous interventions in primary health care are vital to improve health, reduce child morbidity and encourage a reduction in fertility. Mehrotra and Biggeri (2002) found that the children in larger families were more likely to work longer hours, and conversely spend less time in school. The Indonesian example above received multilateral funding, but how can these interventions be paid for sustainably?

Mehrotra and Biggeri make a number of suggestions for regulating the informal home based working sector. Firstly they suggest that home based workers must be registered. They recognise that only adults will register as it is illegal in most

countries for children to work. The benefit comes due to becoming visible to the authorities. There are government programmes in many developing countries providing benefits to such workers. The informal sector, and particularly the “missing” children within it are invisible so unreachable (Subrahmanian, 2002). With the registration of the home based workers (and the accompanying issuing of identity cards) there is the possibility for welfare funds to be set up for their benefit paid for by taxes excised on the companies they contract to. India has such a tax on the manufacture of bidis (cigarettes) which is low, but provides some income into a welfare fund that some workers can access.

Mehrotra and Biggeri (2002) write that Welfare Funds must provide the following minimum benefits”

1. Specific health benefits, related to the nature of home based workers, including maternity benefits;
2. Scholarships for children to go to school;
3. Old age pensions;
4. Life insurance;
5. Child care facilities.

As mentioned earlier, if the parents of child labourers belong to some sort of organisation that protects the interest of workers, the likelihood of children getting into school significantly improves by 24.7%.

Lastly government support for productive activities such as home based industries should also include certification of the necessary skills, skills training, marketing skills, and the provision of savings and credit facilities. Dehejia and Gatti (June 2002) make predictions that if poor countries increased GDP per capita income from \$504 to \$615 child labour would decrease by 3%. They state that there is a direct link between access to credit and school participation so it is easier to increase household access to credit than to create overall economic development. Likewise the provision of basic infrastructure such as roading, water and electricity will all provide a basis from which productivity of home based industries will increase, improving profitability with the hope that the result will be a reduction on the reliance on child labour, enabling the children to attend school.

Conclusion

The problem of child labour is still enormous today with well intentioned but ill conceived efforts to stamp it out by banning on goods produced by children simply creating a class of “invisible child workers”. While a good education will unquestionably prepare a child to make the most of opportunities that present themselves over their life time, prevailing market conditions may deprive them of those opportunities. The likelihood that a child will be born to work or go to school is heavily influenced by their mother’s childhood. If she had good nutrition and medical care and an education, she will pass on endowments of good health, positive attitudes towards education and the ability to negotiate the need for her children to go to school. Household productivity can also be significantly affected by a number of other exogenous factors such as climate, geography, where they live i.e. proximity to commercial activity, labour force surplus, absence of union activity, infrastructure such as roading, access to water for irrigation, power, crime, corruption, conflict and the effectiveness of local and central governance.

I contend that children and their families can be winners only if the children can enjoy good health, nutrition, safety and access to education. It is up to their parents to provide these things so they will need a variety of interventions, credit, training, infrastructure, resources, functioning civil structures and freedom from corruption, conflict and oppression. In short this presents us with the classic chicken and egg dilemma. I believe the needs of both child and parent need addressing simultaneously. Funding for some interventions is easier to gain than others, being pragmatic, if money is available for economic development (which is more often the case) then start there. Though not well distributed, the reduction of poverty through economic growth in China has seen increases in school enrolments () (Chen 2001). The battle for the “development dollar” will never cease, I hope those who hold those dollars have that small Indian slum dwelling boy’s courage to imagine a world where all can be winners.

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