Child Work and Mobility

Jo Boyden and Gina Crivello

Writing about children and 'the politics of culture' at the end of the 20th century, Sharon Stephens (1995) characterises the modern world in terms of 'transnational flows of commodities and people; by vast numbers of refugees, migrants, and stateless groups; by state projects to redefine the threatened boundaries of national cultures [...]'. Children are typically cast as unwitting and passive subjects of these shifting global forces, rather than active participants who experience, challenge and reshape the world around them. Boys and girls who migrate alone attract particular attention internationally as victims whose rights have been violated, thus triggering an array of protective policy and programmatic responses. Yet the extreme economic, social and political inequalities that commonly underpin this trend remain largely ignored.

Prevailing ideas about independent child migration reflect recent efforts globally to re-set the boundaries of what it means to be a child; these efforts increasingly define and govern children's use of time and space. Growing attention is given to children's vulnerability, their learning needs and dependence on adults, with emotional attachments formed in the context of stable nuclear family structures being regarded as central to their development and wellbeing. In this expanding paradigm of childhood, the young are portrayed as learners rather than earners. Global initiatives such as the Education for All campaign and the associated expansion of formal schooling have played their part, as boys and girls everywhere are expected to attend school full-time until well into their teens. Relatedly, child migration for work is taken as a threat to schooling and a sign of family breakdown or mistreatment and is often confused with trafficking. As a result, the everyday experiences of migrant boys and girls are overshadowed by a focus on street and trafficked children, child sex workers, or child refugees, with no consideration of the absence of viable options for young people locally.

But then ideas about appropriate childhood are peppered with contradiction. Children growing up in rapidly changing societies find themselves balancing multiple, often inconsistent expectations regarding how and where they should spend their time. So, even though work-related child migration is widely condemned internationally, leaving home to earn an income is what makes schooling possible for some children, enabling them to save for school utensils, uniforms and the like. Despite the intense gaze on work-related migration, boys and girls relocating to access better or higher status schools has thus far escaped critical scrutiny; it is even applauded in some quarters. The recent rise in school-related child migration responds to a dramatic escalation in educational aspirations across the globe. Among social elites it facilitates access to selective education, whereas among populations in poverty it is driven by local service shortfalls. Increasingly, schooling is seen as a means of becoming somebody of wealth and social significance, a way out of rural poverty and the drudgery of occupations like farming, and of releasing the young from the hardships endured by the parental generation. Even though there is no guarantee of an economic return, many families make major financial sacrifices to cover the direct, indirect and opportunity costs of school-related migration, for example by selling their land or animals.

Thus, independent child migration can be developmental rather than detrimental, and children migrate under differing social and material circumstances and with varied outcomes for themselves and for their families. In weighing up the costs and benefits of children migrating we must consider young people's own motivations and accounts. Young people often explain how much they appreciate the opportunities migration has brought them, enabling them to see the wider world, make new friends and access resources like libraries and the internet. Furthermore, many of the children who migrate without their parents are in practice not alone but accompanied by trusted relatives or peers. Among populations in poverty, children commonly grow up as co-contributors to the household economy and decisions regarding their work, schooling and migration respond to both collective and individual considerations. Child relocation from poorly-resourced to better-off households can mitigate family hardship and, in return for helping out in the host household, enables boys and girls to access learning and care opportunities not available in the natal home. In this way, children's migration for work may strengthen bonds within extended family groups rather than create a social deficit through their physical absence.

This is not to suggest that children's independent migration for work or schooling is without risk. Being young and separated from family networks may increase vulnerability in many contexts. Whitehead and Hashim (2005) maintain that, 'Many of its positive and negative effects do not arise from the fact of migration itself, but depend on what triggers movement, what kinds of circumstances migrants move to and, of course, the distance moved and the length of stay away.' This points to the importance of assessing the situations from which children leave and their positions within structures of inequality, as well as the circumstances they enter into through migration.

References

Stephens, S. (1995) 'Children and the Politics of Culture in "Late Capitalism"' in S. Stephens (ed.) *Children and the Politics of Culture*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Whitehead, A. and Hashim, I. (2005) 'Children and Migration: Background Paper for DFID Migration Team', Department for International Development, London.

. . . .