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Introduction

Euroamerican views on child labor differ from the rest of the world. We seek to keep our children from the labor force. Elsewhere, children are expected to contribute economically.

The chore curriculum

Observation and the emulation of skills is the common model of education in traditional villages. Tasks are assigned to capable age groups and increase in difficulty over time. This ranking of age with associated difficulty of tasks may be called the chore "curriculum" and is present in many societies.

Tasks are often "graded" to be matched with a child's strength, size, and competency. Make-believe play introduces children to tasks where they can practice the needed skills. Adults may also accelerate the child's skill acquisition by providing tools, such as blunt knives or sticks.

Children need little encouragement to emulate others, and are assigned additional tasks when skills are proven. Although very young children are not preferred for most tasks, they are frequently assigned errands and sibling care. Children are eager to emulate older siblings.

Chore curricula can vary greatly within and across cultures. Where children may interfere more than contribute to work, their efforts are discouraged. The chore curriculum is individualized to coincide with the child's abilities and pace of learning.

All work and no play

Separation of work and play is prevalent in industrial society. However, in nonindustrial societies where children participate early in work, there is a blurring of the distinction between work and play

Agrarian societies generally exploit children as laborers earlier than foraging and modern elite societies.

Gender roles first become apparent through the play-to-work transition. In village society, girls consistently spend more time doing domestic chores while boys spend more time playing. Mother's tasks allow for frequent interaction with their daughters and can be shared with a child. In contrast, boys do not socialize with their fathers whose tasks are often too strenuous to share with a child.

"These gender differences are maintained even as societies modernize." Girl's work coincides with her mother's work, and remains around the household. Unlike boy's work that is far-ranging and often looks like play, girls work looks like work. Play-to-work transition can also be accelerated by food shortages, a loss of the father or mother, illness, and other environmental factors.

Tasks are usually gender-specific, and when gender roles are breached, it is often seen as unnatural.

Productivity and proficiency

Village curriculum differs from the standardized public school system. The No Child Left Behind initiative requires structured teaching, concentration, and memorization. In contrast, in the village curriculum, some skills may require years of practice for mastery, while most are learned easily at a relatively young age.

Foraging societies may be more demanding for skill mastery in comparison to farming societies. However, skill acquisition is still fairly undemanding. Children in foraging societies acquire skills and an early age. When practice is interrupted, such as attending boarding school, no negative effects are apparent. Some tasks are fairly simple and the skills needed can be obtained at an early age. Mastery is delayed when tasks require strength and experience.

With shifts in the family, such as the arrival of new baby or the marriage of an older daughter, children whose “work” has been playful and casual will need to rapidly increase productivity and efficiency.

Learning Crafts

In the West, it is accepted that every child should be formally educated to a specific level. In the village, the belief is that children must be competent and show an interest before being instructed. The chore curriculum is “required,” the craft curriculum is voluntary and may be discouraged.

Apprenticeship, more similar to formal schooling than self-guided skill-acquisition associated with chore curriculum, becomes more common with craft curriculum when children formally acquire skills.

Apprenticeship

Expected fees differentiate apprenticeship from general skill acquisition. Apprentices usually live with their masters and a period of menial service is required. Early stage of menial work provides a pre-payment and offers a means for evaluation of the apprentice by the master.

Parents are unlikely to apprentice their children. Abuse is often used as a means for discipline and parents are considered inadequate to provide the proper discipline. Masters only teach aspects of a process that is not obvious. Apprentices are expected to “steal” techniques and lore from their masters in order to develop expertise. When expertise is developed, apprentices continue working with their master, contributing all their work to him as a payment for the opportunity.

Apprenticeship does not lead to village prestige. Accomplishments are based on fundamental qualities like motivation and practice that are expected in all types of work, either designer/builder or goat herder. Teaching and learning are not considered necessary for success as an apprentice or the acquisition of any skill.

Becoming a navigator

Unlike the hands-off approach to skill acquisition, the Puluwat encourage their children learn to navigate despite the small number of individuals who actually succeed in their endeavors. Learning to navigate takes on the appearance of formal schooling in modern society; memorization is essential along with testing and lengthy instruction.

Milk debt

Parents, especially mothers, view their children as critical laborers, whose labor socialize them for society and pays their "mother back for the 'milk debt.'" Children are expected to complete tasks to lessen their parent's burden. Assistance by the parent is rare and is more often provided by other children. Praise for completion of a task is also rare.

Many communities rely on child labor for survival. Parents may discourage acquisition of more complex skills and reassign mastered tasks. Expectations rise in labor-intensive agricultural communities, whereas, in foraging communities, expectations are lower. Parents manage children's time and labor to maximize the benefits to themselves and the family.

Little buckaroos

In US history of “taming” the frontier, large families were essential, and children were expected to fulfill many responsibilities. Homesteaders also relied on orphans for labor. Thousands of children were sent west to supply farm labor. Orphan trains continued until 1929, indicating our recent shift from viewing children as chattel to cherubs.

Poverty and children's labor

In many less-developed countries, parents continue to have children despite increasing burdens. Children are often recruited for dangerous labor where payment is uncertain. Children often go away to labor and endure harsh treatment from employers. Despite poor working conditions, they volunteer and are encouraged by parents to go.

Fictive kin ties are created to mask virtual child slavery which is often labeled as an "apprenticeship." Children, lacking skills, are released after years of providing free labor. When children are paid they are expected to send their earnings home.

Child laborers often endure physical and sexual abuse. Child prostitution provides families with higher income than other work, and parents seem guiltless in sending their children to serve as prostitutes. Children often work with harmful chemicals and materials in factories. When laws are created to protect children, traffickers easily get around them.

Although the West considers children as cherubs, children are perceived as chattel in many areas of the world. Impoverished children in Third World countries lives are unmistakably miserable compared to contemporary children, even those in poverty.

Plus ca change

Until recently, the conditions of child laborers in Third World countries were found in the West as well. Apprenticeship generally resulted not in skilled workers, but laborers. Girls went into domestic service, generally never marrying, but bearing children of their master.

During the industrial revolution, parents saw an avenue for increasing their return from children, which resulted in an increase in birth-rate. Early reform was more often directed towards children who were not working, and termination of child labor was resisted.

Improvements in technology decreased child labor. Menial tasks performed by children were accomplished through technology, requiring more mature workers to operate machines.

A recent trend among parents is the decision to have fewer children who they can support and provide for. These parents, desiring a different fate for their children and obtaining middle-class status, look down on those who have many children.