Book review

Rights and wrongs of children’s work, by Michael Bourdillon, Deborah Levison, William Myers, and Ben White, New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2010, 284 p., $75.00 (hardback)/$26.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8135-4888-3 (hardback)/ ISBN 978-0-8135-4889-0 (paperback)

Much is written about child labour and about the broader phenomenon of children’s work too, including Hindman’s (2009) recent near 1000-page encyclopaedia of child labour. The chances of any subsequent ‘investigation into the place of work in children’s lives and development, and... the kinds of policies and interventions that are (and are not) appropriate for ensuring their work is safe and suitable’ (p. ix) for offering anything substantially new on the topic thus appear slim.

Despite these odds, Bourdillon et al. have with Rights and Wrongs of Children’s Work crafted a carefully researched, original, and thought-provoking book written in a highly accessible manner, which deserves a wide readership including policy-makers, activists, scholars, and students. This raises the question of what it is that makes this book stand out given all that’s already written about children’s work?

First, the book is a joint product by four authors who have all widely published on the issue of child labour, albeit from different disciplinary perspectives and with different regional expertise. A major strength of the book is, however, not this mere high-profile joint authorship. But, the fact that the authors have succeeded in integrating their disciplinary qualities and areas of expertise into a coherent social science text, without glossing over important methodological debates and other variations. This is not just true for the book as a whole, but importantly, is realised in virtually every individual chapter. This way, the book combines the strengths of monographs with that of edited volumes whilst circumventing the potential weaknesses of these two types of academic work.

Second, the authors boldly state that this is not a book about child labour, which is regarded as framing the subject too narrowly (pp. ix–x). Moreover, the focus on children’s work is both historically informed and enriched by analyses of the place of work in the lives of children in the Global North. This focus on children’s work, rather than child labour, is, however, not unique (see e.g. Nieuwenhuys 1994, Boyden et al. 1998, Liebel 2004). Yet, the particular strength of the book is that it manages to translate the social scientific insights illuminated by this broad conceptual lens and set out in nine chapters, into a series of very concrete and thought-provoking suggestions for interventions and policies concerning children’s work and child labour presented in the concluding chapter. This includes an urgent call for considering annulling ILO’s Minimum Age Convention (no. 138) (p. 213). The book, thus, succeeds in bridging the gap between social science research, and concrete recommendations for policy and practice.

Third, the book makes excellent use of carefully selected case-study material. These cases put the issue of children’s work into broader context and shed light on children’s opinions and perceptions about their work and the policies and interventions affecting it. This case-material challenges the taken-for-granted and the apparently self-evident, is fertile soil for raising stimulating questions, and, ultimately, invites the reader into deeper discussion and reflection. Further, the

ISSN 1473-3285 print/ISSN 1473-3277 online
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2011.590719
http://www.tandfonline.com
cases vary in stimulating ways. Classic cases like the effect of the Harkin’s Bill on children working in the Bangladeshi garment export industry (but enriched with unpublished material from Sarah Bachman) are presented alongside relatively less known cases such as the Moroccan Meknès example (children working as apprentices in Moroccan garment factories producing for Marks & Spencer). In addition, cases of interventions-gone-wrong are presented alongside positive examples of intervention (e.g. the PPIC-W project in Aswan, Egypt).

Fourth, the book stands out in that it not only considers how work may harm children and subsequent policy implications, but also dedicates a full chapter to an analysis of how work may contribute to human development, drawing on insights from development psychology, economics, sociology, and anthropology. The latter leads to the stimulating question of whether non-working children may, in fact, be deprived of an important developmental opportunity (p. 106) and constitutes the basis for one of the book’s concluding recommendations; ‘recognize and strengthen the role of work in learning and development’ (p. 211).

Lastly, the book is refreshing in its non-dogmatic approach. Whilst the authors are critical of a child labour approach to children’s work and consider themselves as ‘firm supporters of children’s rights’ (p. 92) they are critical of strictly legal interpretations of children’s rights and do not support the view that rights trump all other consideration. Instead, a case is made for a pragmatic, sensitive and flexible approach to children’s rights, stressing that rights-based agendas, like any other approach, should ‘be subject to accountability for their results in the lives of children’ (p. 92).

Perhaps, the only code of thought that remains standing firmly throughout the book is that of social science research. In this respect, it is a pity that a handful of editorial errors have slipped into an otherwise carefully written social science text. Further, the authors do not explicitly enter ontological or epistemological debates, since for that the book is too practice oriented. However, it is evident that social science research is understood in broad terms. This includes approaches that are associated with post-structuralism (e.g. discourse analysis), structuralist approaches (political-economy), conventional empirical research, and child-centred research. The book can, therefore, also be read as a case for bridging disciplinary divides and for meshing skills and perspectives (p. 19). Although I am supportive of such efforts, such undertakings are neither easy nor straight-forward and do ultimately lead to questions about the philosophy of science. However, given the purpose and target-audience of this book it is probably commendable that the authors do not more than touch upon such discussions.

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Notes
1. In fact, the proposed policy framework presented in the concluding chapter is based on two pillars of equal importance; children’s well-being and development, and children’s human rights (p. 203).
2. On a critical note, careful editing would have avoided a handful of editorial errors (e.g. wrong year of publication, miss-spelling names of authors, etc.) that now appear in the text.
3. This transpires, for example, from the comment that at the local level it is often quite clear which work situations are damaging and which not, as well as which interventions work and which do not, whilst these issues may remain unresolved at a theoretical level (p. 179).
4. The importance of collecting baseline data is flagged (p. 216), as is the importance of surveys with well-controlled samples using detailed, patient questioning (p. 18), and panel studies (p. 124).
References

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