

Children and Work Research Series – Session 6

Dr. Matías Cordero Arce

Title: Play and work, continuum or dichotomy? Playfulness and the possibilities of children's emancipation *in* and *through* work.

Abstract: A vast and consistent amount of research on children's work has enriched our knowledge of working children worldwide, especially organizations of working children in the majority world (NATs), that are collectively and intergenerationally struggling for their rights, with special emphasis on their right to a dignified work. The aim of this presentation is to pose the need to confront this alleged emancipatory struggle of children for their rights, with centuries-old critiques of work as bearer of alienation and exploitation, that is, as a hindrance to any significant conception of rights-as-freedom. In a time of emerging new forms of exploitation and precarity under neoliberal post-Fordism and in which feminist and Marxist critiques come together to talk of *antiwork* politics and *postwork* imaginaries, the claims of working children must necessarily engage with these critiques in order to consolidate their emancipatory potentialities. To move this dialogue forward I suggest that a fertile possibility might be to rely on what many scholars have described as a play-work continuum, referring to that playful coming and going from *otium* (play, leisure) to *negotium* (work, business), which has been identified as the normality in hunter-gatherer societies and most non-industrial societies, and which has also been identified in the lives of most working children throughout the world. Digging into this continuum is done being aware of the current co-optation of play and leisure by the "creative industries" and, in general, of their use as new forms of control in the workplace. But with this caveat in mind, this approach allows to acknowledge the possibility of a healthy porosity in the border between play and work, which, if struggled for, might help to carry on with Liebel's (2004) call to strive for the transformation of children's and adults' work into a meaning-generating free activity.

Bio: Matías Cordero Arce is an Independent Researcher and an Educator at a Young Offenders' Institution in the Basque Country. He holds a LLB (Catholic University of Chile) and an MA and PhD in Sociology of Law (University of the Basque Country) and has presented, lectured and published widely on issues related to children's rights. He currently lives in Vitoria-Gasteiz, Basque Country, with his wife Ainara, daughter Maialen, and son Xabier.

Breakout Rooms Report

Room 1

Question around the 4th continuum idea; could that be possible that this uses a play/work dichotomy and hence, is work fundamentally different from play?

Adult work could be looked at as a kind of play, and children's play could be looked at as a kind of work. Then the question becomes how. Instead of assuming a play-work binary, built on a child-adult binary, would it possible to rethink adult work/play in new ways from the perspective of child work/play?

A key aspect of dignified life/ work/ school is where children have real choices, rather than being compelled/ told to do something, that opens the all pandora box of what are REAL choices.

Perhaps children's more fluid play-work agency (in schools, play, and work) could function as models for a better post-capitalistic adult play-work agency.

Play in the rights framework (art 31, GC, travaux préparatoires) is embedded in the development paradigm. How to develop children well. Key milestones, key games, caregivers should provide kids with those at each age (a way to control motherhood) with the idea that you could be playing "wrong" – it is very controlled. Matias talks about the rhetoric of play as power – which is a different play from the one proposed by the rights framework. "Free play" – let children use a space, discover risks, "adventure playground" approach. But even this approach is still top down, adult led, funded by donors who explicitly make reference to "good development".

Are government feeling threatened from kids play as place of revolution? Mosquito device: a device that emits high pitch sound that only children and young people can hear, not older people because ears have lost the ability to hear the sound. This is to keep children away and avoid that they can gather. Children are private; they are supposed to be in specific spaces; the school, the playground, the home. Not roaming around freely. If they do, they are a threat.

Development as emancipatory? Development is a loaded word. Growing up is something that happens to children. But development is loaded, and needs to be unloaded. There needs to be much more context aware and child-based theories that need to be mainstreamed into the development theories, allowing emancipation and agency. We should use this concept as little as possible because it is loaded. It is always development for. For what? Become docile citizens. Child development to become a useful clog in the capitalism.

Room 2

Discussion focussed on three of the four paths to a dignified life suggested in the presentation. The following points were raised:

Work less

Some of us who see benefits for children in their work in learning technical, social and even creative skills, but also enabling some children to break out of restrictions of home and meet peers and others. So even work that in itself may be dull and have little benefit can create situations that are beneficial to children. This means that less work is not *necessarily* beneficial. Though clearly there are situations in which demands of work are excessive in that they interfere with other beneficial activities. And the less work is clearly beneficial.

Work better in an unalienated fashion

Improving conditions of work can be beneficial to any workers. Issue was raised with the strict Marxist principle that employment necessarily means exploitation and alienation. There are many situations in which work needs to be ordered, with systems of hierarchy and paid employment. The issue is how the value of the work is distributed. On the other hand, unpaid care work can be drudgery and exploitative – sometimes worse for the children than paid work. All this is independent of whether or not the work is being performed in a capitalist system.

To rediscover the play/work continuum and its conditions of possibility

One of the issues is what counts as work and what counts as play. Especially outside the paid work situation, children can play at work. If play is essentially enjoyable, there is much scope to increase for possibilities of playfulness in work. One of the problems is in the way industrialised societies physically

separate out activities: home, play learning, and separate members of families from each other in these communities. Because these measures have been developed it has given strength to issues of child labour for attracting attention and funds.

There was a short discussion of refugee children in Indonesia, where refugees are not allowed to work at all and so issues of child labour do not apply.

There was some discussion of legal definitions of child labour which are adopted in various governmental and legal discourse, enabling numbers as kind of measure of progress in activating policies, but bearing very little relationships to how practitioners, many researchers, and the children themselves experience different work situations in real life. The legal definition follows a simple assumption that childhood is about school and play, and the idea of playfulness in work would be foreign to them.