Child Work: A Strategy to Fitting Children to the Macro-Environment in the Ethiopian Context

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Conceptualizing Child Work in the Ethiopian Context

The understanding that children's involvement in over demanding activities at home and outside is recognized as harmful to their development and should be replaced with universal primary education is an established social goal (Larsen, 2003). Indeed, engaging children in unacceptable forms of child labor continues to exist in all parts of the world. Poverty, household situations and school environment force children to participate in labor and ultimately threaten their future physical, psychological and social development. These children could also be victims of discrimination and all forms of maltreatments which eventually deprive them from their human rights and more particularly child rights. In its comprehensive sense, therefore, harmful practices including child labor can be perceived as one form of child abuse. According to Befekadu and Tsegaye cited in Deaslegn(1998, p. 21), child abuse is defined as " any act of omission by individuals, institutions or society as a whole and any condition resulting from such acts which deprive children of their equal rights and liberties and/or interfere with their optimal development ".

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This does not necessarily mean that all forms of child work are detrimental to the child's physical, psychological and social development. Children play pivotal role in generating income and supporting the livelihood of households. The contribution of children in farm plots, household chores and out of home activities is characteristics of societies at all levels of development. However, Children's involvement in work seems to be misunderstood and its negative repercussion on children's physical, psychological and social developments has been over emphasized. Contextualizing the issue of child rights, therefore, seems to be important. Agbu (2009, p. 1) writes:

> *On the subject matter of children and youth, it is very important to examine the issue from the perspective of the African environment, and in particular the existential conditions of the children. The social and economic environment of African children is completely different from that of a European child, for example.*

Children's engagements in customary household chores and in fields with their parents and elders would allow them to learn basic survival skills and may prepare them to cope with demands of particular situations. Apart from developing practical competencies and matured coping strategies related to their local situations, the contribution of work can be viewed as a necessary ground and often regarded as mode of transmission of social skills and cultural heritages. This paper is tuned in light of the contribution child work has on children's psycho-social development. The engagement of children in economic and non-economic activities, especially their contribution to the household income in rural areas, has made many people to perceive child labor as part of

everyday life and a natural process of assimilating them to the wider culture. The prevailing view that assumes work as a means to acquire social skills has narrowed the distinction between the abusive side of child labor and its other dimension. However it seems that there is a tendency to use these two aspects interchangeably and put them into one melting pot. For ILO, child work refers to any work for pay or unpaid, family (domestic) work, as part of the socialization process; whereas, child labor refers to children working in hazardous work environment for long hours in an exploitative relationship that requires intense physical effort that are detrimental to their physical , mental and social wellbeing. The literature draws a distinction between child labor and domestic work in which the later refers to the everyday tasks children have always done for the general maintenance of the family unit and as part of the normal run of socialization(Verlet,2006, cited in Agbu:2009). For Oloko (1997), as cited in Agbu (2009, p. 14):

> *Child work is work in which the primary emphasis is on learning, training and socialization. As such, the work schedule is flexible, tends to be responsive to the developing capacity of the child and encourages his or her participation in appropriate aspects of the decision making process.*

Conceptualizing child work as an indigenous socialization strategy, however, should not obscure the child's educational rights. As stated in ILO's declaration, there is a need to make a distinction between light work and child labor. Accordingly:

> *ILO describes light work in article 7 of convention 138.*
> *Such light work should not be confused with the*
> *continuing high prevalence of other non-educative forms*
> *of child labor among some indigenous peoples. Rather*
> *than being taught traditional occupations and*
> *livelihoods by their parents, many indigenous and tribal*
> *children are denied access to education and are often*
> *caught in hazardous working conditions struggling to*
> *survive in areas with little or no law enforcement. These*
> *children are in need of immediate attention (Larsen,*
> *2003, p. 3)*

The household composition hypothesis takes into account the household characteristics as explanatory variable in understanding child work. Education of parents, children's relationship to household members, the gender composition of the household, the presence of siblings and several other household factors have important bearings in the explanation of child work. The relative importance of these household factors which give rise to the decisions made in the household and which have important bearings on children's development need to be studied carefully. In light of this argument, this paper attempts to analyze the relationship between family structural patterns, contextual and cultural issues associated with the socialization of children through the process of child work.

The Family as a Socializing Developmental Niche: Like in any other agricultural societies, the Ethiopian family has its own way of inculcating the values, beliefs and other behaviors in the mind of the child. The family becomes a principal institutional setting by which the child socializes itself to the wider

community. One of the mechanisms by which the family accomplishes this is by letting children involve in productive activities in which adults take part. Children start to take active part in domestic and out of home activities as early as age five and six. In many instances, the Ethiopian family can be characterized as extended family. The extended family type provides unique and diversified life experience for the developing child. Every individual older than the child takes active part in this socialization process. Most of the socialization experiences of children take place in informal settings within the family or on work places. As stated by Cushner (1990) cited in Gardner and Kosmitzki (2008, p. 67) "The responsibility for learning falls mainly on the learner, making it rather personal , with extended family members often playing a critical role in the act of instruction, change, discontinuity and innovation are highly valued".

Although there can be similarities across all agricultural communities in Ethiopia, ethnic differences in nurturing socialization through work may be attributed to particularities such as socioeconomic status, parental livelihood and mode of transmission of these skills(Goh & Gardner, 2004 cited in Gardner & Kosmitzki, 2008).

Therefore, a particular Eco-Cultural System of developmental niche emphasizes different skills. In communities where farming is predominantly an activity to support the livelihood of the family the child tends to spend his time in farm plots. For instance, in many parts of the country children engage in these same activities. Certain cultures, however, specialize in some kind of activity typical of certain ethnic groups. The Dorze ethnic groups which are best known

for weaving and making of the traditional 'shema' begin to foster the indigenous work culture of spinning and combining different colors by children as early as age four and five. The Konso ethnic groups, for example, are best known for curving status and other varieties of usable objects out of stone and wood. Although documented sets of evidence are not available to back up the assertion, from my personal observation, Konso children engage themselves in such activities in middle childhood period. The astonishing entrepreneur skills of the Guraghe children can be attributed by the unique tendency for them to be economically independent and contribute towards sustainability of the family.

These culture specific modes of socializing the child through work, apart from establishing the habit of work, contributes to the development of imagination, better muscular coordination and effective intrapersonal relationships. I have made an attempt to show how ethnic based work culture is transmitted to the young in the process of socialization in these three ethnic groups.

In many cultures, the transition from childhood to adolescence is marked by some sort of public recognition, called rites of passage. These are ceremonies or rituals that recognize or symbolize an individual's movement from one status to another along the developmental span. According to Schlegal and Barry (1991) cited in Gardner and Kosmitzki(2008), rites of passage are found in most non-industrialized societies where nearly 80% of girls and close to 70 percent of boys go through some form of initiation. Rites of passage related to children's involvement in home and outside activities are not uncommon in the Ethiopian context. For example, in agricultural communities, at some point during the day

time in which the father sits under the shade to get rest or have his meal, the first child starts to practice plowing in which this is taken as a sign of taking adult responsibility.

Birth Order and Its Relationship to Children's Role in the Family

The birth order in the Ethiopian family has significant implication in determining ones role in the family. Be it male or female, first born children are growing with high expectation from the family and the community at large. As a matter of fact, children happily accept this image and prepare themselves psychologically to discharge this adult responsibility as early as middle childhood period. According to Gardner and Kosmitzki (2008):

> *The unique structure of the self-concept as well as some of the psychological processes related to it , are largely influenced by ones developmental niche and the level of the ecological system (micro-system, meso-system, exo-system,) in which one finds oneself at a particular time in the life span(p.142).*

In the Ethiopian context, the rural first born child assumes a bigger responsibility compared to the urban child. He/She is not only responsible for caring younger siblings but also other members of the extended family especially grand fathers and mothers. In a single parent home the first born child takes the role of the missing parent. He/She is responsible for maintaining the family cycle. First born children enter the world of work much sooner compared to second and third born children in the Ethiopian context. In families where livelihood is based on farming, first born children start to socialize themselves to the wider ecological system taking over the work load from their parents.

Entering the world of work creates more positive image of one's self and promotes independence. Parents have higher expectations for, exert greater pressure toward achievement and acceptance of responsibility, and interfere more with the activities of first born than later born children. Triandis (1989) cited in (Gardner & Kosmitzki, 2008) writes:

> *Culture-specific views of the self-result from early exposure to differing values and beliefs about the person in general. For example, child rearing practices in collectivist cultures tend to introduce and reinforce the welfare of the collective over the welfare of the individual. In contrast parents in individualistic culture teach their children that the individual's primary goal is independence and the establishment of a unique self. Based on these fundamentally different approaches, it seems logical that individuals in collective and individualistic cultures should vary in how they view themselves (143).*

Such relationships define the role of the first born child to be responsible, protective and caring for other members of the family. The transition from adolescence to adult roles appears to be much smoother in the Ethiopian context. As a result, it is unlikely for the individual to face role confusion. Societal expectations coupled with positive self-image may contribute for early identity formation. Gardner and Kosmitzki, (2008, p. 155) for example, writes:

> *"If the first born child is expected to take over the family business and assume care of the aging parents, it is not*

necessary for him to explore a variety of different social roles, thereby making the search for identity more difficult and of longer duration".

Child work: a Means to Resolve the Industrious versus Inferiority Stage Conflict

The age range between six to puberty is especially important in the development of competence. Erik Erickson in his psychosocial theory of child development named this stage as industry vs. inferiority stage. Children at this stage like to plan, carry out and complete projects in their own. The conflict between the two extremes is resolved when children are allowed and supported to be engaged in the kinds of activities that revolve around adults. Essa (1999) marked this period particularly important in fostering the habit of work.

This period is particularly important in the development of workmanship, persistent greater understanding of social rules, and citizenship. Children who do not develop an adequate sense of industry will settle for mediocrity and do less than they are able, with a resulting sense of inferiority. Older preschools and school aged children should be allowed time, space, materials, and support to engage in the kinds of activities that build a sense of industry (p.110)

I see a sharp contrast between children reared in the rural and urban settings in the Ethiopian context with respect to making them industrious. In the rural areas where agriculture is predominantly the main activity and means of livelihood for the family, children are actively involved in this labor intensive activity. Children born and brought up in urban settings seem to lack this

opportunity either due to the urban way of life or parental misconceptions on the nature of work and its virtues for the psycho-social development of children.

Ethnic Based Work Culture and Its Contribution to Socialize Children

Ethnographic studies conducted in different regions of the country, for example, showed how cultural values to a particular ethnic group tend to shape attitude of its young towards work. Each ethnic group in Ethiopia is known for a particular kind/type of work culture and ways of fostering this unique fabric to the young. It is this aspect of uniqueness among the ethnic groups that gives flavor and richness to the Ethiopian culture. Although not exhaustive, in the following paragraphs, an attempt is made to discuss how the culture of work enables children to fit into the macro world and its contribution as a strategy to socialize children.

The Dorze Ethnic Group

The Dorze Ethnic Groups are living on the highlands west of Lake Abaya. The Dorze Ethnic Groups are traditionally famous for weaving and the production of the traditional cloth '*Shema*'. The eye catching combination of colors coupled with meticulously knitted and designed women's long dresses and the traditional blanket type '*Shema*' is a symbolic representation across most cultures of Ethiopia. Although the '*Shema*' making still remains at a cottage level, it has shown much change in style so as to fit the fashion of the day. These new developments have attracted even people of other cultures to

include it into their list of costumes. '*Shema'* making passes through series of stages before we get the end product. These series of stages require division of labor among every Dorze family. Literally speaking it is impossible to think of an indigenous Dorze child who has not acquired the '*Shema'* making skill. The acculturation of the child to the making of '*Shema'* begins at early childhood age in which children contribute their share in the process. A significant portion of the income generated by the Dorze family comes from the sale of *Shema*. Children's share in this income generating activity in the family niche cannot be underestimated. Hence, it is not uncommon for the Dorze child to cover his school expenses from the sale of cotton made scarf which marks the rite of passage to 'Shema' making.

The Konso People

Another ethnic group in the south west part of Ethiopia, respected for hard working and ingenuity, is the Konso. The Konso people are especially appreciated for the terrace farming practices and stone work. The skillfully constructed terraces that cover the Konso landscape makes them to be described as megalithic people (Jensen, 1936; Amborn, 1998; Straube, 1963; Ministry of Agriculture, 1988) Cited in (Watson &Regassa, 2001). Among other things, the convictions that work is an inherent constituent of Konso culture has been acknowledged by several ethnographic researchers who have made extensive visit to the setting. Hallpike(1972) cited in Watson and Regassa (2001) writes:

> *The Konso take intense pride in their agriculture, and have a strong work ethic. Visitors to the region have remarked that the Konso go to work in the fields with*

such vigour and passion that it looks as though they were
going into battle (p.246).

The work-ethics established through time in the history of Konso people helped the formation of ethnic identity. It is this strong belief that helped them to cope up the effect of environmental degradation, low and unpredictable rainfall which eventually affects the maximization of harvest. The writer of this paper had an opportunity to live and work among these people. Socialization of children to this work-oriented society is an important milestone in their development. Konso children have strong musculature, athletic physique and never give-up composure. The industrious nature of the society at large makes the Konso child to resolve the confusions and contradictions of the psycho-social stages of development adequately. Does this relentless effort to fit into the macro-environment corroborate with school achievement? Does this work-based life style inculcated into the minds of Konso children, as a function of the socialization process, pay tribute in other areas as well? The answer to these call for empirical investigations.

The Guraghe People

The "Sebat bet" Guarghe are celebrated ethnic groups for their entrepreneurship skills and business orientation taken as symbolism by most Ethiopians. This work oriented style of life and feeling of early economic independence is transmitted as cultural heritage to children as early as four and five years. According to Fecadu (1972); Worku(1995); Getnet(1995) cited in Nahu Senay(2001):

> *The Sebat bet Guraghe, confederation of seven houses have long been known as early migrants to Addis Ababa and other urban areas, where they have pioneered the development of associations and have sought to assist their home communities (p.30).*

Although men from other ethnic groups as well have had success stories in the business world, the Gurghe ethic groups are uniquely associated with all aspects of trade and manufacturing.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how child work can be used as a useful strategy in socializing the Ethiopian child into the wider world of life. It has aimed to see the moderating effects of the family setup, birth order and the work ethics most relevant to particular ethnic groups. Apart from its economic importance, the participation of children in multi-faceted activities of the society has quite immense contribution in socializing children into the wider culture. Despite this positive aspect, there seems a trend to make children alien to the world of work.

Exposure of children to the world of work as early as the late child hood period (of course without denying their educational rights), is a useful avenue to nurture socially acceptable behavior. It is not only the formal schooling system that transforms the growing child into a matured adult. The informal socialization process taking place in the family developmental niche combined with the most structured school based education can bring the required social

and cognitive changes. It is by doing so that we can help the child to practice values, attitudes and habits of the wider culture within which he/she lives. The issue is so broad that a number of family and cultural variables are involved to shape the overall development of the Ethiopian child. Hence, there is a need to address the issue in a better and systematic way.

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