

Chapter Four

The Impact of Child Work

4.1 Introduction

It is often claimed that children participating in economic activities are exposed to serious risk on their physical, emotional and moral health. In almost all the previous studies conducted in Malaysia only negative impact were highlighted (See chapter one). The absence of positive impact in these studies is meant to show that child labour should reasonably be condemned. In the writer' s judgement although these studies have shown that child labour is to some extent harmful, however the severity of the harm caused by child labour shown in these studies may not give enough moral ground to condemn a culturally approved practice. In this chapter the writer will examine the impact of work on the children in Balakong New Village, to show whether this negative impression of child labour is justified. The writer will go further to show that child labour, in some circumstances may either be beneficial or necessary.

4.2 Physical Health

As explained in chapter two many children, especially those who work in factories, small workshops and construction sites, were engaged in "hazardous work " . In fact, the major concern with child labour is due to its negative impact on children' s physical health. This is implied in the overriding concept "hazardous work " , which is defined as "work that is likely to jeopardise the health, safety or

moral of children " by convention No. 138 of the International Labour Organisation. Although moral well-being of children is mentioned in the definition, however the physical health of children is often the focus of attention.

The biological characteristics of children are different from adult because they are still in the process of growth and development. This difference in biological characteristic according to Forastieri (1997: 10) makes children more susceptible to work hazards. The writer provides a comprehensive list of work hazards which children at work are exposed to, i.e. occupational accidents, occupational diseases and ergonomic hazards (1997: 8-29).

Some training may be needed for children to use some of tools and equipment. Besides, they must also be very careful when they use these tools and equipment. Children are normally relatively less well trained to handle these tools and equipment. They are also less conscious about safety at work. These make occupational accidents more prone to happen among child workers as compared to adult workers. Furthermore, the tools and equipment children use at work and the work methods are normally designed for adult. Therefore, the special need of children is normally not taken into consideration when these work methods, tools and equipment are designed. Therefore children using these work methods, tools and equipment run a higher risk of fatigue and injury. Children at work are also exposed to harmful agents, such as heat, noise and dust. Due to their special biological characteristics children are more likely to acquire occupational diseases.

Although this study shows that many child workers are exposed to work hazards, not many children are seriously injured during work. Half of the full-time

child workers say they were once injured during work. However, in most cases the kind of injuries they sustained were minor wounds, i.e. cuts that needed no professional medical treatment. However, in a few cases these children do need a few stitches. Among the part-time child workers only some sustained minor injuries, such as cuts and burns once during work. These part-time child workers were working in eating stalls and the cottage industry.

However, there were a few cases of serious work accidents involving child workers from Balakong New Village. For example a sawing machine cut off portions of two fingers on the right hand of a boy who worked in a furniture factory, when he tried to cut a piece of wood (see Photographs 9 and 10). He was hospitalised for two days. However, he left the hospital and did not follow the full course of medical treatment. This worsened his condition, and now he is unable to stretch his fingers. For this injury, he only received RM 2,000 as compensation from his employer. His family did not take any legal action against his employer because they felt bad to do so against someone they know well. Besides, they were also worried that if they took action against the employer no other employer would want to hire the boy. This incident shows civil law may not be able to protect the interest of child workers.

One of the key informants, a former child worker, also had a portion of his middle finger on his right hand cut off by a sawing machine during work. Later, when he was helping his parents tap rubber the same finger was clamped by a machine used in rubber production causing it to fracture. In another incident a metal cutting machine also cut off a small portion of this middle finger, when he worked

in an engineering factory (see Photograph 11). For all these injuries he received no compensation.

Another boy who worked for a company having business in many South East Asian countries was luckier. He fell from a rooftop as he was installing a ventilation system on the roof, and sustained a seriously broken arm and was hospitalised for two weeks. He had to be laid off for one whole year. However, his employer paid him about RM 6,000 as compensation, plus all the medical expenses incurred during hospitalisation and the following check-ups for one year. After that he went back to work in the same company. He and his family were very happy with the arrangement and had no intention to sue his employer.

Photographs 9 and 10

A Boy Lost Portions of His Two Fingers On His Right Hand





Photograph 11

A Key Informant Lost a Portion of His Middle Finger

During Work When He Was A Child Worker



Besides the immediate impact of child work on his person, its impact on children' s physical development too need to be studied and evaluated. However, as the writer is not medically trained, it is beyond the writer' s ability to do so, except to make some superficial observations. For example, the writer observed that a relatively tall boy who worked for his father in a small motorcycle repair workshop used to squat and bend his back and legs while working on motorcycles for many hours a day. This has caused him to be slightly hunchbacked.

However, it seems that the work hazards that affect child workers are partly due to the nature of the work and partly due to mishandling of tools and machinery, carelessness, as well as ignorance of children' s development. Therefore, it is believed that the situation can be improved if employers, parents and child workers are educated about these matters.

4.3 Education

We have seen in the previous chapter that many parents, community leaders and villagers who disagree with child work were worried about its effect on children' s education. We have also seen that child labour in Balakong New Village is closely related with children' s poor academic performance. Many of those who were expelled from school went to work because they needed an alternative to schooling. While those who left school on their own free will normally see no more future in schooling and felt that it is better for them to work. Therefore, to some extent child work is both the result of leaving school and the reason for leaving school.

In this section the writer tries to explain the interrelationship between child work and education. Although there is no strong evidence, but there are indications that part-time child work affect children' s academic performance. A close examination of the result of Year-end Final Examination, in the year before and after the part-time child workers in Balakong Primary School begin working revealed that 50% of them had more than 10% decline in their academic performance after working. The writer also discovered that some of these children only work as little as one hour per day. Perhaps work made them lose concentration in their school work, as they have less time. Besides, 54.17% of all the child workers in the primary school were already low achievers. Therefore, there was not much room for further decline in performance. So, child work is very likely to have affected the academic performance of these child workers. Besides, it is very likely that many of these child workers will end up dropping out of school when they are promoted to secondary school, as it will be more difficult for them to cope with the school work, if they do not do something to improve themselves now. This is possible because a number of the full-time child workers in fact began working when they were still in school. In short, for many of these child workers, time should be spent on their schoolwork instead of working, if they want to do better academically.

It is important to point out that child work does not seem to affect many children' s interest in schooling. Only 2(3.38%) out of the 53 part-time child workers said they like working more than schooling. While 12(22.64%) were not sure of their position. Out of these 14 part-time child workers only one did not want

to stay in school, while 6 were not sure.

Many child workers (including full-time child workers) who did not want to continue schooling were affected by their own assessment of their academic ability. Many of them believe they were not good academically and see no hope of getting through the third year secondary examination, the PMR (Penilaian Menengah Rendah)/SRP (Sijil Rendah Pelajaran Malaysia). It is clear that this examination had discouraged them to continue schooling.

Many parents, as stated earlier, see child work as an alternative to schooling as it enables children to acquire some useful skills. However, the effectiveness of this alternative depends very much on two factors, i.e. the willingness of employers/masters to impart skills and the duration the child stays in one occupation. Many child workers indicate that their employers/masters were rather keen to impart skills. This is evidenced in the child workers' ability to perform skilful jobs such as welding, handling machinery, repairing motorcycle and installing car accessories, as explained in chapter two. If we bear in mind that these children were delinquent juveniles and low achievers in school, their ability to perform these skills is impressive. But as we have seen in chapter two, many child workers change their occupation rather frequently, mainly because they are not very sure of what career path to take. This could affect the effectiveness of child work as a form of skill training. This will also have adverse effects on the child workers' career prospects, as shall be explained later.

Work experience also enables good students to learn some useful skills and to bear responsibilities. This is supposed to contribute positively in their

socialisation processes. Work make many of these children more practical as they were dealing with concrete situations in business and the working world, rather than abstract knowledge in books. Besides, certain abstract subjects they learn in school such as mathematics can be put to practical use at work. For example, those who help in hawking were often receiving and changing money, which allows them to use mathematics in a concrete situation.

On the other hand, children were sometimes entrusted with important tasks such as taking orders and minding stalls or workshops when their parents or employers were not around. Bearing responsibility can make a child more mature.

4.4 Emotional Health

It is often reported that child workers are fatalistic. This is only natural if these children are victims of family misfortune. However, this did not seem to be the case for majority of the child workers in Balakong New Village. When these children were asked whether they were happy working and with their jobs most children were unable to distinguish between the two concepts clearly. Therefore, the answers they gave which are here taken to be the answer to both questions. It was found that the majority of them (68.35%) answered the question affirmatively. The main reason for this is obvious; most of them were not forced to work by family misfortune.

There were generally three main reasons why they were happy with their work/job. Firstly, many of these children were satisfied with their income. This is not a surprise as we have seen in chapter two that at their age many of them were

rather well paid, and their pay enabled them to pursue many of their interests freely. Secondly, many of them, especially the full-time child workers said although they work for long hours, they were not pressurised at work. This should be understood in relation to the pressure in school. Most of these child workers were once poor or uninterested students who faced loads of schoolwork and examinations in school. Besides, some of their employers were rather lenient with them. Some of these child workers indicated that their employers treated them like friends. Thirdly, many child workers felt that what they learn in their work are something practical, something that they can use to make a living. In contrast, schoolwork is abstract and irrelevant in their life. In one extreme case, by working as a motorcycle mechanic the boy achieved his ambition. This shows that these children had limited ambition, all they want is to make a living. It is perhaps others like the writer who impose on them ideas that they never think of. Some part-time child workers see their work as a kind of enjoyable activity that brings in income. Therefore they do not see work as a burden.

However, some of these children may not be honest to their own feeling because some of them expressed their regrets in leaving school and they would like to go back to school if they were given another opportunity. However, some took positive steps to deal with their regrets, such as going for English lessons, perhaps in preparation for future learning in private institutions.

Over 17% of the child workers said they were unhappy with their job. The majority of them were part-time family child workers. This indicates again that the general explanation is valid, as most of the part-time family child workers were

asked to work. Since they were more likely to be unwilling to work, they were more likely to be unhappy. Nevertheless, they gave a variety of reasons for their unhappiness as stated out below:

1. They had to do too much overtime work.
2. Their work was very tiring and tough.
3. They faced a complex work environment and nasty people during work.
4. They were afraid of making mistakes as they might be scolded.
5. They learned nothing at work.
6. They did not like dirty environment.
7. They felt restricted.

Reasons 1 and 2 above show that a few children might be overloaded with work. This is not only detrimental to their physical health but also detrimental to their emotional health. Reasons 3 and 4 indicate that children might be prematurely introduced to a harsh work environment. This was especially true among the girls who serve Carlsberg beer. One of the girls told the writer that on one occasion she was surrounded by a group of drunken men, who asked her to drink with them. This is something no decent people want a 16-year-old girl to face. Reason 5 shows that sometime work may not be an effective alternative to schooling. Reason 6 indicates that some child workers were working in unsatisfactory environments. Some sites where children work, such as factory and kitchen are poorly maintained, and it is clearly not suitable for children to work in such environments. While as any kind of work need a certain degree of discipline, this may disturb the emotion of children who are naturally playful. This however can be good for them, as some form of

discipline is needed in children' s socialisation process.

The rest of the child workers (13.92%) were not sure whether they were happy with their jobs. Many of them, especially full-time child workers, were aimless. Two boys express this aimlessness clearly. One of them said: "What to do? If I am not going to school, so I have to work " . "Whatever job is the same, at least for now " , said another boy. Some of them started working this year, so they still have no idea what they want. Perhaps, it depends on whether the money is good or not.

4.5 Moral Health

In the Chinese culture idleness is seen as a source of all sorts of vices. Therefore, many parents believe that if their children are not schooling they should be working. Working, as opposed to idleness will prevent children from becoming delinquent. One father expressed this perception very clearly when he said that by allowing his son to work he was sending his son to be "educated " (disciplined) by others, since he had failed to do so properly. To some extent this perception is accurate, provided children are working in good environment. One need some discipline in work, and the employers will also make sure that his employees have some discipline so that their jobs will be well done.

However, in the first place we must distinguish the impact of dropping out of school from the impact of working. The writer believes that once a delinquent child drops out of school it is very likely that he will become more delinquent. This is because dropping out of school means he has more time to pursue other activities

including vice. Besides, without the control of the school authority means he also has also more freedom to do what he likes. Whether work helps to instill some discipline in him depends on the work environment.

However, in most cases the parents' objectives are not attained, as their children do not become better after they start working. Instead there is a possibility that they become more delinquent. In their work environment children are often exposed to various bad influences and have more opportunities to pursue activities society deems to be only suitable for adults, such as drinking. As they work among adults, they may pick up some of these activities from their adult colleagues.

On the other hand, having their own source of income will give them more autonomy. Many of the activities the child workers pursue, such as gambling and going to discotheques are expensive. Before they begin working they had to rely on their pocket money to pursue these activities. Now that they have their own source of income they can pursue such activities more freely. There is evidence to show that child workers pursue such activities more actively when they get their pay. Some child workers told the writer that they normally would go to karaoke bars or discotheques to celebrate when they received their monthly salary. There was also an incident where a child worker lost about RM 200 on the horseracing machine immediately after he received his salary.

Materialism is probably another moral danger that child workers face when they have access to cash. As it was discussed above many children were happy with work because of the money they earn. We have seen in chapter two that many child workers spend most of their salary on things like entertainment and expensive

clothes for themselves. In fact, many part-time child workers work for this reason. When their pay is inadequate to purchase clothes and for entertainment, such as in the case of factory workers, many girls can easily be persuaded into prostitution¹⁴.

In short, if properly managed, child work may be beneficial to children' s moral development because to some extent it imposes some discipline on children and allows them to bear some work responsibility. But, if child workers are exposed to various forms of vice in their work environment, child work could be very detrimental to children' s moral development. Unfortunately the writer observed that in Balakong New Village only very few full-time child workers were not delinquent.

4.6 Long Term Impact

In the previous sections the short-term or immediate impact of child work were examined. However, the magnitude of some of the impact of child work could not be examined except over a long period of time. One of such impact is the career prospect of child workers.¹⁵

In this section we will examine a sample of life/work history of former child workers, who are now in their twenties or thirties. They were asked to look back into their lives and work history and state whether they were happy with it.

¹⁴ According to Moon, many of her factory girl colleagues were persuaded into prostitution this way.

¹⁵ This is closely related to the claim that child work is an alternative to schooling.

a. Case Study 1: Mr Woo

Mr Woo, 26 years old, is a car spare parts dealer.¹⁶ He began working when he was 9 years old, when he was in Standard 3 in primary school. Then, he was helping his mother tapping rubber. He continued doing so till he was fifteen, when he was in Form 2. Normally, he went to work after school, as he was attending morning classes. However, when he was transferred to afternoon classes in standard 5, he went to work in the morning starting at about 6 o' clock. At that time he could tap tens of trees a day. Besides rubber tapping, he had also worked in an orange plantation and a factory, before leaving school after form 3. He left school mainly because he failed his SRP (Sijir Rendah Perlaajaran Malaysia) examination. After leaving school he went to work in a factory, which produce paper, for two years as a machine operator. He became an apprentice mechanic up to 1992, after he left the factory. In 1992, with the help of family capital, he started his own car spare parts business.

He believes work had affected his study, as working in the morning made him very tired in class. However, he was not very interested in his education. Lack of schooling brought him a number of setbacks in his present job. For example, poor linguistic ability and limited knowledge have affected his ability to communicate with certain people. However, despite these setbacks he still feels that he is doing well.

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b. Case study 2: Mr Kok

Mr Kok, 30 years old, is a car spare parts dealer. He also began working when he was 9 years old. He was then helping his mother plant vegetables until he was 13 years old. From 13 to 16 of age he helped his mother tap rubber. He used to work in the afternoon at about 2.30pm, as he was attending morning classes. When he was transferred to afternoon classes, he went to work at about 6am in the morning till about 9.30am and then went to school. After school he would go to work again.

He failed his SRP examination twice, in both occasions he failed Bahasa Malaysia. After leaving school at 16 years of age, he went to work as a mechanic for nine years. His starting pay was RM 260, and the highest pay before he left was RM 1,090. After leaving the workshop at 25 years of age, he became a floor supervisor in an engineering factory for 1½ years. After that he started a car spare parts business on joint venture with some friends.

He does not think that child work affected his study because he works voluntarily, as his family was not poor. Instead, he feels that it was good for him to work, at least he knew how money was earned. However, if given a second chance he would like to receive more education.

c. Case study 3: Mr Soon

Soon is a 26 year old machine operator. He began to work at 11 years of age, when he was in Standard 5, in a plantation that planted durians and flowers (Orchid) to do some manual work like picking durians, putting fertiliser and watering the plants. He worked after school at between 1pm to 6pm. He was earning RM 5 per day. From Form one to Form three he worked part-time as a self-employed hawker, selling hotdogs early in the morning from 5am to 10am, before he went to school in the afternoon. He also worked for a short while for a newspaper vendor and in a plastic factory. He left school after he passed his SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia) examination with a second grade certificate. After leaving school he went to work in a printing factory until now. Now he earns around RM 1,000 per month. Although he is not very happy with his income and career, he does not think that this is a consequence of child work.

d. Case study 4: Mr Gan

Mr Gan is a 23 year old salesman. He began working in a farm at 11 years old. He picked eggs in the farm together with some friends. They were paid around RM60 per month. Work was tough but their boss was very friendly to them and he brought them to supermarket in Kuala Lumpur once in a month. According to Gan going to supermarket then was the most enjoyable thing in their lives. He normally went to work after school in the afternoon.

During his secondary school days i.e. from the Remove class to form two, he worked for a newspaper vendor in the morning before he goes to school in the

afternoon. He was originally paid RM30 per month which was later increased to RM50 before he stopped working for the newspaper vendor, after working for about three years. He left school in form two and went to work in an engineering factory for four years. There were around 10 children of his age working with him. They were happy together, although their boss was strict, as he scolded them for every small mistake made. His starting pay in the factory was over RM200 and the highest pay he received before he left the factory was over RM700. After he left the engineering factory, he went to work in a furniture factory for a short while before he began hawking for a few years, selling many kinds of food. At the time of the interview he was paid around RM 1,200 per month.

Gan believes work had greatly affected his study to the extent that he had to leave school before he finished his lower secondary education. He regretted leaving school early as lack of schooling makes it very difficult for him to advance his career. Difficulties in reading and counting make him inefficient in his job.

e. Case study 5: Mr Foo

Mr Foo is a 23 year old hawker. He dropped out of school and went to work at 14 years of age. School was boring to him, that was the main reason why he was always absent from school. After he dropped out of school he worked in many places including an orange plantation, a furniture factory, and an engineering factory and was also doing some painting work for a salary. Work was tough; he remembers working in an engineering factory from morning to midnight but was only paid RM 8 per day plus some overtime allowance. However, he did not feel exploited at the

time. Now he is a hawker, selling noodles in the village.

He regretted dropping out of school very much because the lack of education brought him a lot of setbacks in his life. For example he dare not go to fast food restaurants, especially with girls, because he does not know how to place an order in English. He had some English lessons, but gave it up when his classmates laughed at his pronunciation. "Honestly, if you give me another chance, I will stay in school. Now I don' t think children should work ", said Mr Foo with deep regret.

f. Case study 6: Miss Moon

Moon is a 26 year old machine operator in an electronic factory. She dropped out of school on her own initiative when she was 14 years of age. Her poor command of Bahasa Malaysia made it very difficult for her to follow lessons in school. This affected her self-confidence greatly. After she dropped out of school she worked for her aunt to learn some tailoring. After one year she started to do some contract work for a tailor in Sungai Wang Shopping Complex in Kuala Lumpur. At that time she was earning around RM300 to RM400 per month, depending on the season. This continued for about three years before she went to work in an electronic factory for about 6 years. In the factory, her initial pay was RM300 per month plus some overtime allowance and the highest pay she received before she left the factory was RM600 plus some overtime allowance. Now she is a machine operator in another electronic factory and is paid RM810 per month plus some overtime allowance.

As a machine operator (a factory girl as she called herself) she is at the

bottom of the hierarchy in the factory, this makes her vulnerable to many kinds of bully from the management. In her opinion starting to work early may be good for some children as they learn how to deal with people earlier, as long as it does not affect his education. If given another chance she would like to continue her education as she thinks she was only weak in Bahasa Malaysia. Therefore, to her child work is bad only when it affect children' s education.

g. Case study 7: Mr Boo

Mr Boo is a 28 year old unemployed. He began to help his mother tap rubber when he was 8 years old. This went on periodically, depending on whether he was attending morning classes or afternoon classes, until he was in form two. Then he only worked when he attended afternoon classes. His family was not poor but for some unknown reason his mother wanted him to work. In form two he went to pick eggs in the same farm as Gan in case study 4. After form 3 he dropped out of school because he failed his SRP (Sijil Rendah Pelajaran) examination. From form one onwards he was rather delinquent; he was involved in gambling, smoking, and often absented from school and joined a gangster group. After dropping out of school he worked for an electrician for one year. Then he worked as a lorry assistant for three years before he went to Germany to work as an illegal foreign worker in a restaurant. From 1990 he had been going back and forth to Germany until today. When the writer met him, he was preparing to go again. Initially in 1990 he earned about 1000 Marks (about RM 2,200) per month in Germany. Now he can earn around 2600 Marks (about RM 5,800) per month. However, he was not happy with

his career and life and was very pessimistic about his career. He believes had he received more education he need not go to Germany to be exploited.

4.6.1 Implications of case studies

Case 1 and 2 shows that if a child worker acquire enough skills and capital it will not be difficult for him to move up the social hierarchy, from a skilled labourer to a small time businessman. As indicated in chapter one, this is a common pattern of social movement in the 19th century South East Asian Chinese community. However, capital is essential for the skilled labour to move up the social hierarchy. In case 1 and 2, Mr Woo and Mr Kok were fortunate to have family support. But in case 7, Mr Boo needed to go all the way to Germany to acquire capital, in the hope that it can make a change to his life. Case 3 on the other hand, shows that being slightly more educated, i.e. five years of secondary education, does not seem to improve the livelihood of a person. In the other cases frequent change of occupation led the child workers nowhere, as they have not acquired enough skills in a particular job to become skilled workers. This to some extent reduces their earning ability. These examples show that child work can be an alternative to schooling if it is carefully planned. However, in the majority of cases, the child workers do not plan their career. In most cases they need many years of work experience and try a few jobs before they know what they want in life.

However, in all cases lack of schooling had brought some setbacks to the former child workers. All of them are wiser now and would like to receive more education if they are given another opportunity. Some children may not like

schooling, but a few years later, many of them would regret leaving school early.

4.7 Conclusion

It seems that child work is to some extent detrimental to children. However, we should not overlook its positive impact and its function as an alternative to schooling, when other alternatives are not available. Perhaps, the harmfulness of child work depends very much on what children are exposed to in work and how they work and how their working lives are planned.