

CHRIS POND

Working children: education or exploitation?

The term 'child labour' conjures up images of hapless waifs, their feet bare and their faces blackened with soot.

Reading some of the Local Education Authority bye-laws still in force to regulate the employment of children, you might imagine that such an image was appropriate. In some parts of the country it is still prohibited for children to be employed 'extracting sugar beet from the ground', as a 'lather boy in a barber's shop', working 'under a gang master' or 'sweeping chimneys'.

The danger is that such images, amusing as they are, cloud our understanding of the true nature of children's employment in the 1990s. The fact is that such employment is not confined to the harmless pastime of newspaper delivery. Much of it is unregulated and can place children at risk of economic exploitation, educational disadvantage and physical danger.

The National Child Employment Study, established by the Low Pay Unit and Birmingham City Council Education Department, has just published the results of a survey of 1827

secondary-school children aged 10-16 in Birmingham schools.

Touchstone

Following the demise of ILEA, the 'second city' came first in the league of city Education Authorities. The sheer size of the city, and its mix of schools and districts, makes it a good touchstone for assessing what is happening elsewhere in Britain.

The survey included 16 secondary schools, selected with a mix of catchment areas, ranging from the poorest inner-city areas to the more prosperous outer suburbs. The sample matched closely the pupil population of Birmingham in terms of gender and ethnic origin.

The questionnaires were completed from the selected groups as a classroom activity, but with each pupil remaining anonymous.

The results were disturbing. More than four in ten of the children (43%) had some form of employment, excluding babysitting, running errands and other activities not covered by the law. This is not, in itself, cause for concern. Nor is it surprising. An earlier Low Pay Unit survey in London

had revealed almost exactly this result.

What is disturbing is that three-quarters of the children were working illegally. A quarter of them were too young to be employed at all, being under the minimum age of 13. Many others were employed for hours that were prohibited, especially where children were working before 7 in the morning or after 7 in the evening.

Even the apparently innocuous paper-round can place a child at risk if it puts them on the streets alone at a time when few other people are about.

Some of the children were doing jobs that were illegal because the type of work was prohibited: generally, children should not be working in factories, engaged in street trading

(unless employed by their parents), in a bar or licensed premises, or in contact with dangerous machinery and poisonous chemicals.

Myth

We found children doing all these things. The notion that children are employed solely or mainly on paper rounds is a myth. These accounted for less than a third of the jobs children were doing. More children's jobs involved factory work, shop work and cleaning than newspaper delivery, especially in the case of 14 and 15 year olds.

In fact, children are employed in almost every area of work carried out by adults. This raises the issue of economic exploitation. Children are cheap. This may not be of concern when they are employed in jobs

which are the preserve of children, such as paper rounds. But where they are employed to do the same job as adults or school leavers, we must ask whether they are being used as cheap alternatives.

The 1986 Wages Act abolished minimum wage protection for people under 21 in shopwork, catering, clothing manufacture and hair-dressing. We found children employed in these industries for a third or half the hourly wage to which an adult, doing the same job, would be entitled by law.

Overall, a quarter of the children earned £1 an hour or less, with many earning less than 50p. One unfortunate youngster came home with a wage which worked out, on an hourly rate, at just 7p an hour.

Labour market

Many older children resent being used in this way, but see little alternative if they are to supplement diminishing funds from pocket money. They may also consider that, employment prospects deteriorating all the time, they should get a foot in the labour market as soon as possible.

Younger children are often delighted to be paid anything at all, and rarely calculate the hourly rate. The present author, now streetwise about the law relating to children's employment, remembers working in a butcher's shop each Saturday morning to emerge with 50p and a pound of pork sausages.

The danger is that children's employment at low rates of pay may damage the employment prospects of school-leavers, and may place firms that prefer to rely on adult staff at a competitive disadvantage.

The dangers are not only economic. More than a third of the children in the survey reported an accident at work, including cuts, burns, bites and broken bones. Children can also find themselves involved in road accidents and assault (or worse) while at work. The examples given by our own sample are not for the squeamish.

- *I got my fingers caught in the sole cutter.*
- *I went to hospital because a needle went right through my finger.*
- *I sliced half of my finger with a knife.*
- *I was working with a machine and my hand got stuck. It nearly ripped my hand off.*

Examples such as this are shocking. But the full effects of unregulated child employment may be longer-term and more pervasive. The last official survey of children's employment was carried out in 1972. It concluded that:

Pupils who spend more of their out-of-school time in employment tend to be less able, less industrious and less well behaved; they attend less regularly, play truant more frequently, are less punctual and wish to leave school at an earlier age than those who work for fewer hours or not at all. (1)

The Emrys Davies report caused considerable public concern and resulted in the passing, the following year, of the Employment of Children Act. Up to that point, most of the legislation relating to children's employment dated back to the 1920s and 1930s.

So it does today. The 1973 Act, although approved by both Houses of Parliament, was never implemented.

The Act would have brought the standards applied nationally up to the level of the best LEAs. It would have required that children be registered for employment before the employment began, and not afterwards as at present.

Failure

The failure to implement the Act was justified by the additional demands it would have placed on hard-pressed local authorities. LEAs are even more hard-pressed today, but more effective protection for children at work is still necessary.

If this requires more resources from central government, this must be balanced against the costs of unregulated child employment,

measured in terms of the health and safety and education implications. When the standards of education in Britain are already falling behind those of our European competitors, it is not sensible to allow children's schooling to suffer further through unregulated part-time employment.

- *Is the starting age of 13 still appropriate?*
- *Should children be protected by a minimum wage?*
- *Are the current prohibitions on hours and types of work appropriate?*

All these questions and more will need an answer if Britain's two million working children are to be properly protected.

Child rights

Such questions are already being considered by the European Commission, which is drafting a binding Directive on the protection of children and young people. The new UN Convention on the rights of the child

will also place pressure for more rigorous legal protection.

The rest of us need not sit back and await the outcome of these developments. History suggests that, if we do, we may wait for some time. Parents, teachers and employers all have a job to do, to ensure that children are not exploited, that they are not placed at risk and that their education doesn't suffer.

Nobody wants to ban children's employment al-

together: it helps children to develop independence and responsibility, while they earn the extra money to buy the next pair of trainers. But, unless we ensure that the work children do is properly regulated, there could be a heavy price to pay in the longer term.

The National Child Employment Study will be issuing a 'good practice guide' for LEAs. It would be pleased to hear from parents, teachers and others their views and information about working children. Please write to the Low Pay Unit or to Ann Searle at Birmingham City Council Education Department.

Contact Chris Pond (Director), Low Pay Unit, 9 Upper Berkeley Street, London W1H 8BY.

The report, *The Hidden Army: children at work in the 1990s*, is available from the Low Pay Unit, price £6.

Reference

1. Emrys Davies, *Work out of school*. DHSS, 1972.

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