

*Preliminary findings from research carried out in India over the summer, supported by the  
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Education policy sets the terms for who is vulnerable, what is childhood and how schooling offers protection to the most vulnerable and restores their childhood. These terms are typically influenced by the ‘global’ – directly, when state projects are funded by international organizations, or more subtly, when global debates bound definitions of vulnerability, childhood and schooling. But also to note, that as policies translate ‘global definitions’ into national mandates, they are also instantiated ‘locally’ and experienced by ‘real’ students, parents and teachers in classrooms and communities. Does lived experience give truth to the emancipatory claims of global discourses on vulnerability, childhood and schooling?

Over the summer, thanks to the SKJ Fellowship, I set out to explore this question in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Among the various student categories that the state’s education policy identified as requiring public attention and resources, and thus vulnerable, I chose to focus on child labor for several reasons: despite decades-long efforts by the state, there is a significant presence of child workers in 18 districts of Tamil Nadu; moreover, many of these attempts have been funded by international organizations, the International Labor Organization, ILO, being a key and long-standing supporter; and finally, the implicit policy construction pitting schooling against work, despite on-the-ground economic necessity, presents the kinds of tension in global-to-local policy translations that I hoped to investigate.

A further level of complexity in the study was added by comparing rural and urban (inner city) contexts of vulnerability, childhood and schooling. My research sites were school-based, in districts of high child labor concentrations (Kanchipuram and Chennai), which participated in ILO-led child labor eradication projects that aimed to ‘mainstream’ child workers in state-run schools. I focused on children in Grade 8 (ages 13 to 16), the elementary school-leaving class.

In the urban context, I found that children engaged in child labor typically came from ‘non-traditionally’ structured families, in which both parents were unable or unwilling to take on child-rearing responsibilities – for instance, kids brought up by relatives or from households where a parent had re-married were particularly vulnerable. Economic necessity did not, in itself, appear to result in child labor, though it may be true that poverty correlates with the incidence of such non-traditional family structures. Despite their lower socio-economic status, inner city parents believed strongly in the promise of schooling for social mobility and were willing to borrow against that promised future to fund the direct costs (buying notebooks, for instance) and the opportunity costs (including the loss of the child’s labor) of schooling.

Urban child workers “rehabilitated” in school were likely to remain in school, as they usually had to give up work (typically in small-scale factories demanding long and regular hours) to stay in school. Moreover, the construction of school *versus* work for children appears to have high acceptance among parents and children, with the school held as the fitting place for all children. While teachers were not vocal in their anti-child labor stance, their home-visits in cases of frequent student absences may also serve as a deterrent.

In the rural context, I found that nearly all 53 Grade 8 students I worked with contributed to household finances, either by freeing both parents to work or by doing paid work themselves. Most of the students, irrespective of gender, worked in the sari-weaving trade that the district is famous for throughout the world. Despite the state's efforts to present the school as a means of protection against such work (through frequent "raids" on looms using child labor, or through the strong anti-child labor stance school personnel frequently expressed), parents and children shared a construction of childhood in which schooling was compatible with work. While the belief in schooling as a marker of modernity was strong, parents were more pragmatic about the economic opportunities offered by schooling; children were encouraged to work to supplement meager household finances, but also to learn work-skills for future employment. Parents held that weaving-skills were best learnt at 10-12 years, the age at which they had themselves been trained by their parents.

The rural context of schooling and child labor is, perhaps unsurprisingly, quite gendered – yet the gendering of the opportunities represented by schooling and child labor were experienced in surprising ways that revealed 'global' connections of other kinds. For example, girls' schooling is tied to the opportunity structure linked to large multinational factories that have come up in special economic zones in the area over the last decade: girls, after completion of Grade 10, are preferentially hired for these contracted, non-unionized, shift-based assembly-line jobs. The nature of the jobs and the irregular hours preclude such employment for once a girl marries for socio-cultural reasons. Thus, while such an opportunity structure represents some economic empowerment for rehabilitated female child workers, it is often temporary.

For boys, opportunity structures continued to be linked to the non-formal, unorganized sector, often rendering schooling irrelevant in terms of job-prospects. The pressure to learn a skill even while enrolled in school resulted in some boys frequently absenting themselves from school, or leaving before the school-day was over, in order to keep their jobs. Stricter anti-child labor measures that curbed the hiring of child workers on looms may also have a greater impact on the poorest families – since they often did not possess their own looms, children in these households were forced to find riskier employment in after-school hours, including on construction sites.

Thus, the promise of schooling, both as an opportunity and as a protection, is experienced unevenly by students and parents. At best, it translated into short-term, factory employment for girls; at worst, it rendered children, particularly boys, vulnerable to even greater risk of exploitative child labor. The global rights-based discourse that vehemently argues for a blanket child labor ban precludes alternate constructions of the schooling–work link for children and their families. As my research suggests, this may not be most effective policy strategy in all contexts, for all kinds of child labor, and indeed may be counter-productive. While I am keenly aware of the exploitative potential of child labor in developing countries like India, current school-versus-work policy constructions are clearly not working either. Global assumptions of childhood as necessarily free from work may need to be reconsidered in the light of the economic necessities and work-traditions that frame childhood and schooling for families in the developing world.