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Changing families, changing childhoods - changing schools?

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Abstract

This paper reports key findings from a study of young people's engagement in 'atypical' activities in their families. The project focussed on young caring and language brokering as two roles which are not assumed to be "normal" activities for children and young people. The findings presented are from a survey of 1002 young people and from one-to-one interviews with a sample selected from the survey sample. The voices of young people in the interview study are used in the paper to illustrate the diverse range of childhood experiences. The paper discusses some of the ways in which pastoral systems in schools can take account of diverse childhoods and family needs more effectively than they have done in the past.

Background

In our society childhood is assumed to be a time for play, education and socialisation. Debates about (Western) working children centre on a distinction between work and school in which school attendance is seen as the proper work of childhood and paid employment is associated with adulthood. There is legal protection against some kinds of exploitation, though not without a degree of ambivalence about what could constitute legitimate rights for children (Lavalette, 1999). There is a growing body of research concerning the working activities of children and young people in 'developed' countries such as the UK (Leonard 2004; Crafter, O'Dell, Abreu and Cline In press); the USA (Mortimer and Finch, 1996) and Europe (Woodhead, 2004;

James and James, 2008). There is, however, little research focusing on children who take on unusual roles involving adult levels of responsibility.

At a time when there are rapid changes in society, including increased economic migration and the dispersal of the extended family, more children and young people are involved in activities that are outside of those usually expected in mainstream society in Britain and in other Western countries. For example, immigrant and refugee households find themselves dependent on family members who can communicate with officialdom in their new country (Abreu, Silva and Lambert, 2004). Children tend to learn languages at a faster rate than adults and receive regular exposure to the local language in schools so that they become an invaluable resource for the survival of their families (Valdes, 2003). Similarly, changes in social policy and family structures have created situations in which children and young people are sometimes relied upon to care for a disabled family member.

We draw on theoretical insights from the social construction of childhood in which it is argued that in the West for many years the dominant assumption has been that the move to adulthood is accompanied by a gradual increase in engagement in more adult style responsibilities so that children's involvement with work increases with age (Morelli et al, 2003; Flear, 2006; Rogoff, 2003). Some aspects of this model of human development, which has had a profound influence on Western education systems, neglect how changes in society and communities impact on children's development. Rogoff (1995) has argued that "it is incomplete to assume that development occurs in one plane and not in others (e.g., that children develop but their partners or their cultural communities do not)" (p. 141). Social changes have created situations in

which traditional expectations about 'growing up' are sometimes violated because children are forced to take on 'adult' roles. Among educationists the idea of the dependent, innocent child who has the capacity to develop according to lawful stages is such a strong image that it is almost impossible to even think outside those constraints. This 'developmental myth' (Morss, 1992) is so powerful that it pervades our understandings of childhood and, therefore, the treatment of children and the development of policy governing this age group (O'Dell, 2003).

Children who act as language brokers or young carers are positioned in unique circumstances due to their engagement in roles that are usually viewed as adult roles. In a recent study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council we investigated how young people aged 15 - 18 viewed such activities. The roles of language broker and young carer were of interest because they are not generally defined as 'work' in that they are normally unpaid and are undertaken for family members or friends within a nexus of obligations negotiated within a family unit. But they may place new pressures on the young people concerned and distract them from the activities that are expected to dominate their childhood such as going to school. Do we need to review the ways in which we think about child development to take account of the wider range of roles and activities some children and young people undertake? Do we need to revise how we conceptualise "work" to include activities that are usually not seen as work by most people? What perspectives do young people now have on these matters, and what can we learn from their views? Those were some of the questions we aimed to address in this project. The two roles of language brokering and young caring were considered to be good examples of activities that could be studied to address these questions. Whilst there are obvious differences

between the work of a language broker and the work of a young carer (as reviewed in the section below), both activities take place within the family and are often ‘invisible’ to outside agencies such as schools. In addition, both require the child to demonstrate levels of skill and responsibility that are unexpected and unusual for children in the ‘developed’ world.

Assumptions about language brokers and young carers

Language brokering by young people differs from professional interpreting in that translation is consecutive and not simultaneous, involves explanation of the speaker’s meaning rather than word-by-word accuracy, and may cover cultural mediation as well as language (Hall and Sham, 2007). Crucially the goal is to be an effective ally for one’s parents and family members rather than to be an impartial facilitator of communication between two people (Valdes, 2003). In mainly monolingual Western social institutions this activity appears to be given low status, yet language brokering is a demanding and complex activity that has the potential to challenge and extend many aspects of an individual’s personal resources. It involves general proficiency in both languages and specifically in the language required in particular contexts. For example, a child acting as language broker for their mother at a doctor’s surgery may require the folk vocabulary around women’s diseases and the basic language of medical practice. That means that they will need (or acquire) some knowledge and understanding of the domains where language brokering takes place (e.g. the domains of medical diagnosis and treatment). In addition they will have to manage themselves

confidently in complex social interactions (e.g. when parent, professional and child meet with the child simultaneously acting as son or daughter to their parent and as interpreter to the professional). In fulfilling a family obligation they may be subordinating individual personal advantages to overall family interests (e.g. when a student misses a school event in order to accompany their parent to an appointment where brokering is required).

Young carers are children or young people who provide care to another family member who has a disability or chronic illness or has a problem involving the use of drugs or alcohol. The level of care they provide would usually be undertaken by an adult, and this is seen as having a significant impact on their experience of childhood. It is difficult to establish the number of children and young people who act as young carers with confidence both because many operate without official recognition (Olsen and Clarke, 2003) and because researchers employ varying definitions (Newman, 2002). The 2001 census recorded 175,000 young carers in the UK. In public debate it is generally assumed that caring for a disabled parent or family member causes serious problems for children. Their psychosocial development may be impaired because caring duties isolate them so that they have limited opportunities to socialise with their peers (Siddall, 1994). They may feel different from other children and under pressure to keep their family outside of social services gaze (Aldridge and Becker, 1993; Underdown, 2002). In fact the fear of interference and separation may lead young carers to hide their family situation from outside agencies. When young carers meet together, most report that their schools show little understanding of their situation and leave them feeling stigmatised and isolated (Underdown, 2002; Thomas et al, 2003).

Like the work of young language brokers, the work of young carers involves levels of responsibility and maturity that are not normally required of children and young people in Western societies. When a child becomes responsible for an ill or disabled parent, the roles in the family are reversed (Siddall, 1994). Young carers are often characterised in research and policy as their “parent’s parent” (Olsen and Parker, 1997) and positioned as “parentified children” (Mahon and Higgins, 1995:16). On the other hand, disabled parents are often treated as passive, dependent and marginal in discussions about young carers (Olsen and Parker, 1997; Newman, 2002). This offends commentators such as Keith and Morris (both disabled mothers) who have argued that the lack of services and support for disabled parents serves to compound their dependency on their families (Keith and Morris, 1995; Prilleltensky, 2002). Young carers themselves will sometimes highlight what they gain from the situation in terms of skills, confidence and a sense of maturity that they recognise as absent in many of their age peers (Dearden and Becker, 2000).

Method

The project consisted of two phases, a large scale survey followed by an interview study for which participants were selected on the basis of the survey. The initial survey involved young people aged 15 to 18 years old who were students at six schools and colleges in the South East and South Coast of England. Respondents were asked to report the types of working activities in which they were regularly involved either as a paid or an unpaid task. The list of activities was drawn from a thorough review of research into children’s work and piloted on a similar group of young people. The list included ‘everyday’ activities such as walking the dog and

washing the car as well as activities that are indicative of young caring such as cooking dinner for the family, dressing a younger sibling and activities indicative of a language broker such as translating for an adult. The survey responses were examined to determine a sample of potential young carers, language brokers and young people who engaged in 'typical' working activities. A short screening interview confirmed the sample of participants who were asked to take part in the second phase of the project, an interview based study.

The findings presented in this paper are descriptive data from the survey and some key themes from a thematic analysis of the interview data. The focus of the data is upon diverse activities and on the experiences of young carers and language brokers. The quotations from young people are all taken from those sections of their interviews which focused on two vignettes about a language broker and a young carer that are presented below.

1. A survey of young people's formal and informal work activities

The six schools and colleges involved in the survey were selected to represent a diverse range of types of institution, location and ethnic makeup. There were 1,002 participants aged 15 to 18 years old. Based on self-report approximately two thirds were from White backgrounds, 17% were Black Caribbean or Black African, and smaller percentages were from dual heritage backgrounds or from homes where the main language was not English.

The survey sought information about the different working activities performed by the young people. Almost all the young people (98.4% of males and 99.0% of females) said that they had undertaken some form of paid or unpaid work, most frequently domestic work. The other work activities reported by more than 10% of the sample took place outside the home and were, in order of frequency, babysitting (48%), shop work (25%), a Saturday job (23%) and a paper round/newspaper delivery (10.8%). Over 6% of the young people reported that they had acted as a language broker at some time. As is often found in studies of language brokering by young people, the majority of these (71%) were female. A similar proportion (6%) of respondents reported that they had acted as a carer for an adult at home (of whom 65% were female). The level of their involvement in caring tasks was not checked in detail. Thus, at least as reported by young people in mixed communities, language brokering (and perhaps young caring) appear to be more common than is usually taken for granted in public debate and academic theorizing about childhood work activities.

2. Interviews to explore young people's perspectives on informal work

The second stage of the research involved individual interviews with 46 of the respondents to the survey. Those selected included a balanced mix of students who reported having performed common or unusual work roles, males and females, and White British and ethnic/linguistic minority students. The interviews were built around four story vignettes, two depicting young people engaging in common work roles such as babysitting and having a Saturday job and two depicting the unusual work roles in which we were interested - language broker and young carer. The vignette of a young carer featured "Mary":

Mary is 14 years old and lives with her dad and her brother who is 15 years old. Mary's dad is disabled and needs help during the day with activities such as getting out of bed, getting dressed and making lunch. Mary loves her dad and is happy to be there for him. However she also misses school some days if her dad has a bad day and needs extra help. Sometimes Mary wishes that she could see her friends after school like her brother does.

The language broker vignette concerned "Eduardo".

Eduardo is 14 years old. He speaks English and Portuguese. Eduardo's mum can't speak English, so she often asks him to help her. Eduardo is proud and pleased to help his mum but is embarrassed when he translates for her at the doctors. Eduardo misses school some days because his mum needs him to help translate for her.

There were standard questions about each vignette (such as "What advice would you give Eduardo if he was your friend?") and questions that required the participants to compare the four stories (such as "Which child has the hardest job and why?"). In this paper we focus on responses to Eduardo and Mary's situation to illustrate how school pupils react to experiences of young people who are performing roles that are assumed to be 'atypical'. From the thematic analysis, which is reported in full elsewhere (O'Dell, De Abreu, Cline and Crafter, 2006), we have selected those themes that were emphasised in participants' responses to those two vignettes.

Findings

a) Representations of normality

The analysis of what respondents had to say indicated that they had a conception of a 'normal' childhood against which they judged the scenarios presented to them. A 'normal' childhood was consistently seen as a time for friends, play and school. By implication a 'normal' childhood was assumed to be a time without responsibility both within the family and outside the home. Childhood was seen as a time for dependency rather than a time for being depended upon. At the same time many of the young people, whether or not they had had experience of language brokering or caring, were aware of a tension between parents' obligations to a dependent child and a child's own obligations to their family. Some families are in unusual situations and need their children to help in unusual ways.

Respondents' conceptions of childhood were bound up with their conceptions of what constitutes a 'normal' family and what can be expected of 'normal' parenting. Those who ask too much of their children (e.g. disrupting their schooling so that they can act as language brokers) and those who ask too little (e.g. failing to prepare them for normal domestic chores in the home) were seen as falling short of what is required of a parent who should create the conditions for a 'normal' childhood.

The dominant view was that engagement in unusual activities such as acting as a language broker or a young carer could disrupt or interfere with the (normal) course of development. Both those who had direct experience of young caring or language brokering and those with no experience of either role viewed the activities in negative

ways. The unusual working activities were seen to result in a loss for the children concerned, not only a loss of childhood opportunities such as time to play with friends but also a more symbolic loss of childhood itself. While some participants spoke directly of the loss of childhood, others portrayed the unusual work role as a “burden” and the individual who had taken on that role as an “outsider” to the normal peer group. For example, Louise, a 17 year old carer whose mother was disabled, said:

I didn't fit in well with other people because when it came down to it the way I saw it was “well, I will try but they don't understand where I'm coming from. So it's very hard to relate to them because I don't go through typical issues that they do.” I mean, they would come on to school going “oh, my mum's a bitch, she won't let me do this, she won't let me do that”, and I'm sitting there thinking “oh my God, how superficial are you, you don't even know what the hell you're talking about’.

Some of those who had acted as language brokers sought to emphasise that the normal pattern of their life as a child had not been disrupted because their parents had respected its requirements. For example, a 17 year old boy whose family was from Portugal commented:

Alright. I used to do the same thing for my parents... But now my sister's here 'cause she came from Portugal and now she does it for them as well but they understand a little bit now so now it's ok... But I never really missed that many yeah that many lessons from school 'cause it was always they had their appointment at the doctor's or something it was always like you know after college after school.

Participants were most likely to emphasise the negative aspects of unusual work activities when they discussed the parents in the scenarios. The negative view of the parents of young carers and language brokers was given by those who had had no experience of the activities and by those who had engaged in them. For example, a common reaction to the vignette that showed Eduardo missing some school time when acting as a language broker for his mother was that she was seen as a ‘problem’ and a burden for her son. Two thirds of the participants commented that Eduardo’s mother should learn to speak English.

However, while describing the impact of engaging in such unusual activities as negative and damaging, some participants who had themselves engaged in these activities also drew upon a very different view of the impact. Conflicting ideas appeared to co-exist in their responses. These young people presented themselves and the characters in the vignettes as located both outside and within the dominant ideas of childhood. On the positive side, they described these unusual activities as something to be proud of and something that would act as an additional stimulus to development. This notion was most often expressed by the language brokers who sometimes associated it with a pride in their cultural heritage. But it also appeared in the responses of some young carers who showed a pride in the skills they had learned as a result of their activities. In addition, some of the young people who had been involved in atypical roles depicted the supposedly atypical activities as simply ‘normal’, what anyone in their situation would do and many of their friends from the same background did.

b) Conflicting needs and duties

Common activities such as baby sitting and having a Saturday job were associated with a positive future trajectory, preparing the young person for later life, teaching financial planning and domestic skills necessary for work as an adult and life at university. Domestic duties were seen to be very important to the participants. When they discussed these common activities, participants rarely highlighted a need to choose between work and home. However, some were concerned about the levels of responsibility given to the young people in the vignettes considering their ages. One boy's parents were criticized for not requiring him to undertake domestic responsibilities expected at his age and a girl of the same age was perceived to have premature responsibility (because she gave the money that she earned to her family). Most of the respondents took for granted a set of implicit rules governing paid work, which included not only the adult concerns for safety and non-exploitation but also concerns of particular interest to the younger generation (e.g. the proceeds of any paid employment during childhood should be for the benefit of the young workers themselves rather than a boost to the family income).

In contrast, activities such as language brokering or young caring were more often seen as causing conflicts between a young person's obligations to their home and to their school, their friends, etc. Where there was seen to be a conflict, for many participants the family was the most important priority. There was an understanding, by both those with experience of these unusual roles and those without such experience, that, while what was being asked of the young carer and the language broker might not be fair, once the request had been made the young person was positioned as a child within a family system and required to comply. If that meant

sacrificing school attendance or giving limited time to homework, that would have to be tolerated. Respondents who had undertaken unusual roles sometimes had good reason not to expect understanding of that position from their teachers. Thus, Aida, a student at a sixth form college whose family originated from the Sudan, responded to a vignette about a language broker:

R: I don't think the teacher would understand cos it happen to me once, I had to bunk off school to go with mum cos she had to see the doctor for her eyes. But when I came to the college and I explained they didn't actually believe me

I: Right

R: They won't believe me, they just said 'don't do that again, let your dad do it' or

I: So they don't understand it's your responsibility

R: They don't understand, no, they don't understand unfortunately. But they should understand

I: Have you had any teachers who do understand?

R: Yeah but they still mark me absent, as in, they won't understand. Even if I call them and said 'um, I'm' you know 'I can't come today cos I have to help mum' or something, I just say I'm sick and instead, it make more sense and they might believe me more when I say that, so they don't actually understand

Thus, a key finding from the interview data was that when family needs and childhood norms are in conflict, many young people will prioritise the needs of their family. It appears that our ways of thinking about contemporary childhoods need to take account of the more fluid and 'atypical' family situations that are increasingly common in contemporary society. Some of the young people in our research, particularly the language brokers, articulated a sense of their roles as both typical and

atypical, typical in their own communities and atypical when interacting with the mainstream, majority culture usually at school. The way people think about childhood is not fixed but involves shifting, fluid concepts which alter depending upon the cultural, geographical and historical context (Burman 2008). This study suggests a further source of elasticity which has not been emphasised in earlier discussions of this subject - the range of work roles that children may be required to undertake when their family situation is unusual.

Rethinking contemporary childhoods: policy implications

The key policy implication of these findings is to provide support for those initiatives that aim to support young carers and language brokers not by 'normalising' their lives through a rigid and exclusionary application of 'normal' rules but by extending the recognized boundaries of normality. For young people involved in either language brokering or young caring a key implication from the study is to view these supposedly 'atypical' roles within the context of changing childhoods and changing families in which there is an acknowledgement that 'normal' childhoods' are now diverse childhoods lived in diverse social and familial contexts.

There are, however, specific recommendations for language brokers and young carers because of the social context within which young people are either young carers or language brokers. It is likely through patterns of immigration and settlement that language brokers live in communities where others also perform the same role. However it is unlikely for young carers to share their experiences with other carers in the same neighbourhood. In relation to language brokering examples of a supportive

practice in school might include introducing arrangements in multilingual areas that place family-based, volunteer language brokering on a regular footing and offer public recognition of the skills of the broker. In schools some older students with language skills that are in demand can be given training through a short after-school course so that they can be recognised as able to act as interpreters or language brokers at parents' evenings (QCA, 2008).

In relation to young carers our respondents' comments also lend support to those of the current initiatives in this field that have a "normalising" effect. That might include area-based group activities that enable young carers to see their unusual work activities at home as more widely shared than they might have imagined and to exchange insights and concerns with others in a similar situation. Peer support schemes might use email as well as face-to-face group activities, as has been done successfully in relation to school bullying (Hutson and Cowie, 2007). Schools may place their support on a systematic basis by adopting a Young Carers Policy, by ensuring that there is a named member of staff that pupils can talk to and whose role in relation to young carers is well understood by staff, pupils and parents and by allowing young carers to telephone home if they are worried about a relative. Young people consulted by the Princess Royal Trust for Carers advocated a young carers' card scheme that would help young people identify themselves and access facilities such as a phone or an early lunch pass without having to explain their personal circumstances (Frank, 2002).

Traditionally pastoral care in schools has privileged the assumed long term interests of the individual pupil over what may be seen as self-centred interpretations by

parents of the family's immediate needs. School pastoral care may sometimes elide into a position that prioritises the interests of the school as an institution with concerns about enhancing overall attendance records and maintaining compliance with uniform working practices. Many of the young people in this study, including those with no experience of language brokering or young caring, saw a sense of obligation to one's family as paramount and asserted family priorities over individual priorities even when that was uncomfortable. Pastoral care has always faced major challenges in balancing these interests. With changing family circumstances the rhetoric of policy developments such as the Children's Plan (2007) in England appears to require a recalibration of the scales.

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