# On being a 'worker student': understanding the intersected identities of children and adolescents in Nicaragua
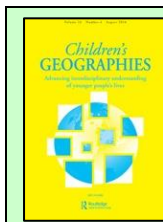
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Children and adolescents in Nicaragua have intersected identities as both school students and child workers. Most of the literature supposes that a child must be one or the other, and problematises 'child workers' as either victims or heroes. Yet, in Nicaragua, this is seldom the case, as most children and adolescents are both workers and students. Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality helps to understand these young people's lives: As students, they face multiple difficulties getting a decent education; as workers, they struggle for respect and fair treatment. However, as school students who also work, they face challenges specific to their intersected roles. In an empirical study, a group of socially committed adolescents accepted neither work nor school as identity-defining factors, emphasising instead their role in the community as rights defenders and builders of the future. Internationally, this 'intersectionality lens' may be helpful in developing policies that respect the rights of young worker-students.

**Keywords:** Nicaragua; intersectionality; child worker; education rights; rural childhood

## 1. Introduction

In the remote mountains of northern Nicaragua, the rural economy is dominated by the labour intensive cultivation of shade-grown coffee, which leads to a high incidence of child labour. A major challenge here is the need to protect children's right to education in the face of pressure to work on the coffee plantations, which particularly affects the poorest, landless families (Shier 2010; Shier et al. 2013). This paper considers the lives, and multiple roles, of children and adolescents[1] who live and work in this area, and draws on their testimony to show how they have an intersected identity, aware of themselves as both school student and child worker, but refusing to let either of these labels determine their sense of who they are.

However, this is not just a question of personal identity formation. In order for these young people's rights to be respected, and for them to be treated justly, those who make the big decisions that affect their lives, particularly in relation to education and labour policy, need to understand how this combination of student and worker roles affects real-life opportunities, so that this can be taken into account in developing more responsive policies. In the course of the discussion, it will be proposed that Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality is a helpful tool for developing and then applying such an understanding.

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To explore these issues, the paper is structured in seven sections. After this introduction, the second section shows how the relevant literature generally supposes that a child must be either a student or a worker, not both; so that 'child worker' becomes a defining category whose members are problematised as victims to be rescued; as part of a social evil ('child labour') to be eradicated; as a factor in dysfunctional labour markets; or as members of a radical social movement in a heroic struggle for the 'right to work'. On the other hand, the identity of 'school student' has almost universal approval.

The reality in Nicaragua, however, is that very few children are entirely one or the other. The third section therefore identifies a number of additional factors that contribute to Nicaraguan children's sense of self, before focusing on the roles of school student and agricultural worker, and how children live at the intersection of these identities.

Section 4 introduces (or revisits) Crenshaw's original concept of intersectionality, and considers how her ideas, formulated in relation to the struggles for justice of Black women in the USA in the 1980s, can be brought to bear on the reality of Nicaragua's child worker-students today.

Section 5 then reports an empirical study designed to explore this idea further, although its findings confounded the researcher's expectation. A group of socially committed (and it must be said, atypical) adolescents who both worked and went to school expressed their identities in ways that recognised neither of these as defining factors, emphasising instead their role in the community as educators, rights defenders, and builders of the future.

Section 6 considers how these ideas can be used to help develop policies and programmes that better respect the rights of young worker-students, including some initiatives already underway in Nicaragua and other issues that have yet to be tackled. In the concluding section, it is proposed that the 'intersectionality lens' may be a useful tool to better understand these young people's reality and so develop appropriate educational policy and provision.

Although the paper has been written in the impersonal academic style (more out of habit than anything else), there is an irony in this, as the personal history and positioning of the author, and the critical reflexivity that avails of these, have been essential factors in its construction. It therefore seems important to mention these in introducing the paper. The invisible, impersonalised author is, of course, a person; not a professional academic, but someone who, though a native of Ireland, has lived and worked in the Nicaraguan coffee sector for 11 years, and thus can draw on quasi-insider knowledge of the lives of the children and adolescents who live there, and the culture and environment that surround them; knowledge that came first through experience and only later was validated through study.

## 2.   The problematic 'child worker' identity

In much of the literature that touches on the topic of children and work, there is an implied assumption that a child must be either a 'school student' or a 'child worker'. 'Child worker' thus becomes a separate and defining category whose members are problematised in at least four different ways from different points of view:

(1)   As victims to be rescued
Child workers are commonly represented in media and popular discourses (and some academic literature too) as sufferers from exploitation and abuse, and from the violation of their right to go to school (Abebe and Kjørholt 2009; Panjabi 2008; Zakar et al. 2015). When represented in this way, it is seen as self-evident that they need to be rescued from this predicament, stopped form working and sent to school. Discourses of this kind tend to downplay or ignore children's agency. There is, however, strong evidence that misguided efforts to 'save' working children from

this fate without consulting them may lead to deterioration rather than improvement of their well-being (Levine 1999), and that, 'vulnerable children are often harmed rather than protected by being prevented from working, and particularly from earning money' (Bourdillon 2006, 1201).

(2)   As part of a social evil (child labour) that is to be eradicated

The phrase 'eradication of child labour' is ubiquitous in the literature, along with its 'abolition' and 'elimination' (Castillo and Benzaken Koosed 2010; Weston and Teerink 2005), and is particularly associated with the policies of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and its International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) (ILO 2002). Though some writers make a distinction between 'child labour' as that which is inherently harmful, and 'children's work' which is not necessarily so (e.g. Hart 1992, 21), in popular discourses, these subtleties are easily lost so that all children's work is condemned regardless of evidence of harm or benefit (Bourdillon 2006). This can be seen, for example, in the publicity surrounding the 'Global March against Child Labour' (ILO 2002, 99; Levine 1999). A related argument is the one which claims that school and work are incompatible, or that children who work do worse at school and go on to fare badly in adult life (ILO 2015).

However, such positions are strongly contested, with scholars asking: 'Should the world really be free of "child labour"?' (Morrow 2010, 435), 'Abolition or acceptance?' (Dillon 2015, 297), 'Protection or participation?' (Gasson et al. 2015), and 'To eradicate or to legalize?' (Fontana and Grugel 2015, 61).[2]

(3)   As a variable in equations describing the functioning of the labour market

In the substantial economics literature on child labour, economists use mathematical equations to show how child labour is both a cause and a symptom of dysfunctional labour markets (Cockburn 2001; Jensen and Nielsen 1997; Ravallion and Wodon 2000). Although this kind of analysis claims to demonstrate how 'child labour' is a problem, and focuses attention on certain variables as targets for policy intervention, the child workers themselves as rights-holding human beings are scarcely visible and seldom heard.

(4)   Members of a radical social movement in a heroic struggle against oppression

Seen in this way, child workers become the archetype of 'protagonismo infantil' (the Latin American brand of children's social activism), and a romanticised vision of their struggle becomes the holy grail for advocates of children's autonomous participation (Cussianovich and Méndez 2008; Liebel 2012b). If they happen to work on a city street, they are automatically co-opted to the category of 'street children', with a whole new set of constructed meanings attached (Bar-On 1997; Bemak 1996). Though activist organisations of working children have a strong presence in the child labour literature, it is hard to find information on how large their membership is and what proportion of the world's working children they represent. Given the large number of research studies on working children that make no mention of any such organisation in their lives, and make reference to their relative powerlessness (Hanson, Volonakis, and Al Rozzi 2015), it seems plausible that it is a small minority, and that those children organised in such movements, though they have an important advocacy role, are far from typical. Therefore, while the literature on child workers' social movements is inspirational, it risks misrepresenting the reality of most of the world's working children. The child workers' movement flourished in Nicaragua in the early 1990s, thanks to dynamic adult support and funding from UNICEF (Liebel 2012a), but, according to anecdotal evidence, it had disappeared by 2012 as the Sandinista government moved to embrace the 'eradication' approach (Cabrera Cruz and Díaz 2011; GRUN 2010).

Whilst the identification of children as workers is thus widely viewed as problematic from various points of view, by contrast, the identification of children as 'school students', and of childhood as a time for education, has almost universal approval, and those few voices that oppose such a position (such as the Pakistani Taliban who shot Malala Yousafzai) are roundly condemned in discourses from both south and north (Afaq and Arshad 2013; Ramadurai 2012; Suvorova 2013) (though to be fair, this generalised approval of education for girls has also been critiqued as a hegemonic ideology [Khoja-Moolji 2015]).

Although this discussion has purposefully focused on the way much of the literature seeks to frame a distinctive 'child-worker' identity, separated from the more acceptable school-student identity, there is also a substantial literature that avoids such traps, and instead reports on the many ways in which children successfully combine work and education (e.g. Bromley and Mackie 2009; Punch 2003).

And, indeed, the reality in Nicaragua is that very few children and adolescents are only students or only workers. Most live at the intersection of the two identities; they are both school students and workers (Cabrera Cruz and Díaz 2011; Shier et al. 2013). The following sections will explore further what it means to live at this intersection.

## 3.   Children forging identities in Nicaragua

Since the discussion in this section and the research described in the following section draw heavily on the work of Nicaraguan NGO CESESMA, it is appropriate to explain here that CESESMA is an independent, locally run organisation which works with children and adolescents in the coffee-growing area, supporting them in actions to promote and defend their rights, including the right to education and the right of those who work not be subjected to violence, abuse or exploitation (CESESMA 2012a; Shier et al. 2013; Young Consultants of Santa Martha 2011). One of CESESMA's main strategies is the training and support of *promotores* (boys) and *promotoras* (girls), who are best described in English as young community education volunteers. An account of their activist role in their communities and the way CESESMA supports their development and organisation can be found in Shier (2010).

A full discussion of Nicaraguan children and adolescents' identity formation beyond the intersection of 'school student' and 'child worker' is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it would be misleading not to mention how their sense of 'Who am I?' – is built up from many additional components. For example, adolescents participating in CESESMA's *promotor/a* training programmes have made reference to the following: gender identity (which may be compliant with deep-rooted traditional role norms, but may also question or rebel against these[3]), ethnic and national identity (which may or may not include pride in indigenous heritage), identity with one's place of origin (which may find expression in a strong sense of belonging or a longing to escape – or both), a rural or urban identity, a religious identity (central to everything for some, while of little consequence for others), a social class identity, political allegiance (unusually significant in Nicaragua due to historically entrenched political polarisation throughout the country, leading many young people to identify strongly with the 'Juventud Sandinista', the Sandinista youth movement), and identity with one's age-group (as 'childhood' and 'adolescence' are more defined and distinct life-stages than in the English-speaking world). Another aspect of identity that came out strongly in the research carried out for this paper was a sense of oneself as being organised and active in one's community (CODENI 2012; Matamoros, Aguilar, and CESESMA 2011; Shier et al. 2014).

Whilst the implications of all the above can be explored through the intersectionality lens, that is for another time, as the main concern here is with the intersection of the two factors previously highlighted: the child/adolescent as worker, and the child/adolescent as school student.

Previous experience of working with children and adolescents from Nicaragua's coffee plantations suggests that they have a clear preference for identifying themselves as students, and are often reserved in publicly accepting the 'child worker' identity. To some extent, this may be because they have already encountered the idea that for many adults in authority, the 'child worker' identity is problematic as has been shown above. Those who work on the coffee plantations are aware that adult overseers are at pains to conceal their existence, as employing under-14s is technically illegal. In 2010, researchers investigating child labour in the coffee sector noted that, 'We were able to observe children working at various tasks, although not all of them admitted to it, or they hid when they knew of our presence' (Lacayo Parajón et al. 2010, 27). Examples of children avoiding the 'child worker' label and emphasising the socially approved student identity are also found in reports by children and adolescents who have become researchers with CESESMA; for example, in CESESMA (2012a), a team from the coffee plantations of Yasica Sur, after discussing how to describe themselves, carefully chose the following words:

> Most of us go to school. Ten of us are in primary school and five in secondary. We also help our parents with domestic work and farm work. Some of us live and work on coffee plantations. (28)

It often suits the interests of others (like NGOs seeking to motivate donors) to label them as first and foremost child workers and therefore part of a problem requiring generous donations to ensure its 'eradication'.[4]

 To further explore the significance of this, in both policy and practice, it may be helpful at this stage to revisit Kimberlé Crenshaw's original concept of intersectionality.

## 4.  Crenshaw's original concept of intersectionality

Though the above discussion is concerned mainly with young people's sense of identity, and the concept of intersectionality has been widely used to explore issues around complex and conflicted identities (Ecklund 2012), it is important to be aware that intersectionality is not primarily a theory of identity, but of equity and social justice (e.g. Jones 2009; Ravnbøl 2009). As a lawyer in the USA in the 1980s, Kimberlé Crenshaw wanted to understand why, despite substantial civil rights legislation and gender equity legislation, Black women were unable to get justice in the courts. She showed how they found themselves at an intersection, where neither of the two roads that had been constructed through earlier struggles – the road of civil rights for black people, and the road of women's rights – led to justice. Though women had fought in the civil rights struggle, the anti-discrimination legislation that had since been enacted had failed to take account of women's current needs. Similarly, though black feminists had fought for women's liberation, the opportunities that had subsequently been opened up did not reflect the lived realities of most black women (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). A key idea of intersectionality, however, is that the situation of black women (and by extension all people facing multiple forms of oppression) cannot be understood as simply the sum of two different oppressions, one on top of the other. To fully understand the product of their interaction requires the alternative forms of explanation that the intersectionality lens provides (Clarke and McCall 2013), leading to alternative forms of social action where intersectionality analysis is deployed to tackle barriers to equity and justice (Chun, Lipsitz, and Shin 2013).

 Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality with specific reference to the intersection of race and gender, and it was in feminist and race studies that it first became established as an analytical approach (Anthias 2013; Lewis 2013). More recently, it has been proposed as a useful concept for studying age and generational inequalities, among others (Hopkins 2013;

O'Neill Gutierrez and Hopkins 2015). However, these are not the prime concerns of the present study. The participants in this study were ethnically homogeneous, which is typical of their communities, and race/ethnicity issues did not arise in this context. As will be seen in the empirical findings, however, significant gender differences were reported; and age is inevitably a crucial component of the notion of a 'school student' or a 'child worker' (since the socio-economic status of 'adult learners' and adult workers is very different). However, these are not the principal foci of the study. The focus here is on the intersection between the roles of school student and young worker, where, following Crenshaw, it is suggested that the challenges these young people face should not be seen as simply the sum of a series of challenges in getting an education plus another series of challenges in getting fair treatment at work. What intersectionality analysis suggests is that the challenges are specific to the intersection, and are thus better understood as a product, rather than a sum of the underlying factors which generate disadvantage and inequality.

## 5.   An empirical study that confounded expectations

Although this paper is primarily an attempt to apply an 'intersectionality lens' to critical reflection on eleven years' experience of working with, supporting and accompanying child coffee-plantation workers in Nicaragua; to supplement this subjective-experiential data, a small-scale qualitative empirical study was carried out with a group of 14 adolescents from rural coffee-growing communities (6 girls and 8 boys aged 14–18)[5]. These young people were all active *promotores* and *promotoras*; that is, young community education volunteers who were members of a network organised by CESESMA as described in Section 3 above (and in more detail in Shier 2010). They were thus not a typical or representative sample of Nicaraguan adolescents, and this became very clear in the findings of the study.

In the course of a focus group discussion, the participants were asked to do two tasks: (a) working in groups, to create posters on the theme 'Our identity: Who are we?', which were then shared and discussed (they were purposefully given no other guidance or orientation about how to interpret the instructions or approach the task); and (b) individually, to complete a one-page questionnaire giving details of both their current work commitment, and their current school or college studies if any. The results were collated and analysed. As the research was not university-sponsored, but carried out under the auspices of the Nicaraguan host organisation CESESMA, this proposal was ethically assessed and authorised under CESESMA's locally developed child protection guidelines (CESESMA 2012b), which are founded on the international guidelines in Keeping Children Safe (2011). No ethical concerns were identified.

The young people's response was unexpected. Their description of their work and study commitments was clear enough, but their expression of their sense of identity was not what was expected. Regarding their daily activities: All 14 were active promotores/as (this was to be expected, as it was on this basis that they had been invited to participate in the focus group, and it would not be typical of the general population of adolescents in their communities): four worked on prevention of violence, three on promotion of reading, and one with a local girls and young women's network. Two mentioned being members of their local coordinating team and the rest said that they were involved in community education (*promotoría comunitaria*) without being more specific. As for their role as students, of the 14, one had dropped out of school, one had completed school, and one was now at university. The remaining 11 were all attending secondary school in 2nd to 5th year.

Then they were asked about their work: All 14 engaged in domestic work at home, but with a significant (and not unexpected) gender gap: All the girls said that they did domestic work all or most of the day, sometimes from before dawn till late in the evening; while the boys said that they

did between half an hour and two hours of housework each day. Two of the six girls and five of the eight boys said that they did unpaid agricultural work on a family farm or smallholding, mainly cultivating and harvesting maize, beans, cassava (*yuca*), and coffee; also tending and milking cows. Four of the girls and seven of the boys said that they worked picking coffee on the plantations at harvest time. The remaining boy said that he worked in a coffee-processing plant during the harvest. They also did other types of paid work: One girl worked as a domestic servant, and four boys did paid agricultural work, cultivating maize, beans, potatoes, coffee, and passion-fruit (*maracuyá*), and one had a job in construction. Finally, one girl worked with her father in the family furniture-making business. There was no one who did not work, and some appeared to pack an incredible amount of varied and demanding work, both paid and unpaid, into their days, in addition to their studies and the voluntary community work they were doing with CESESMA. Though the participants in this exercise were adolescents, one would expect similar findings from children, as in these communities, children are likely to be working from six or seven years of age – around the same time as they start school.

In the group task of describing 'our identity', based on previous experience (and analysis of the problematic 'child worker' identity discussed above), it was expected that they would emphasise their identities as students and ignore or downplay their identities as workers. As it turned out, however, they chose to emphasise neither work nor study, but rather the role of 'Promotor/a comunitario/a' (community education volunteer) with CESESMA.

To illustrate how they approached this task, one of the three posters is reproduced here as Figure 1 (the other two were similar in style).
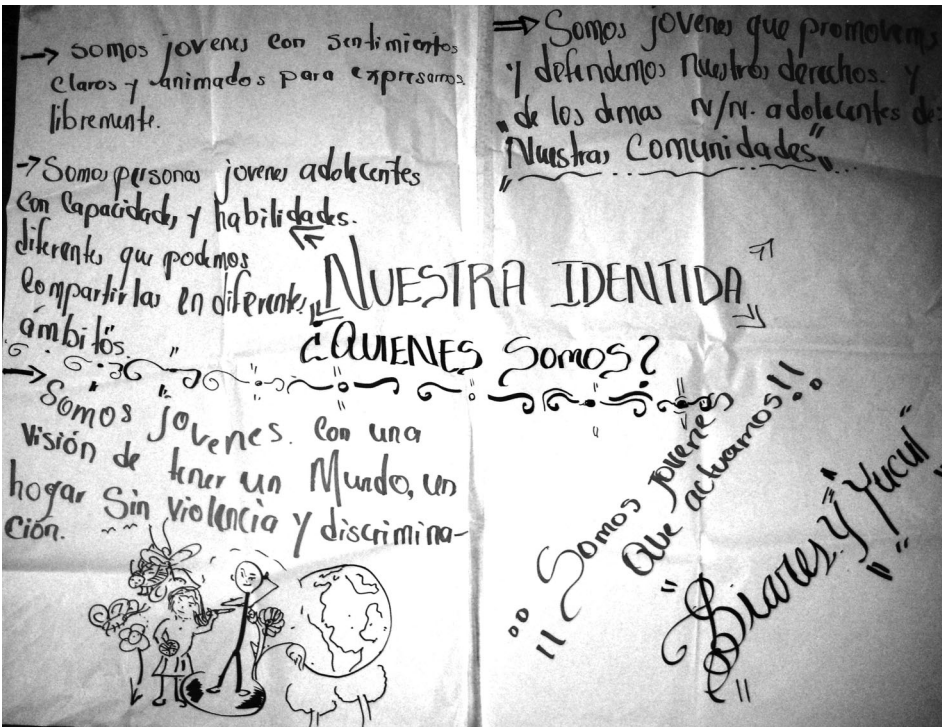


Figure 1.   Example of a poster by adolescent participants on the topic of "Our identity: Who are we".

The words on the poster can be translated as follows:

Our identity: Who are we?
- We are young people with clear feelings and eagerness to express ourselves freely.
- We are young people with different skills and capabilities that we can share in different areas of our lives.
- We are young people with a vision of having a world, and a home, without violence and discrimination.
- We are young people who promote and defend our rights and those of other children and adolescents in our communities.
- We are young people who take action.

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A thematic analysis of the three posters showed that they had chosen six main themes for the expression of their sense of identity, all of which were highlighted on at least two of the three posters:

1. We are adolescents who act to defend our rights.
2. We are free and autonomous; able to express ourselves freely.
3. We are capable; with skills and knowledge.
4. We are Promotores/as; sharing skills for the common good.
5. We are people who are listened to and taken account of.
6. We are creators of a better future.

Thus, for this particular group of Nicaraguan adolescents, it can be seen that they have developed a positive construction of identity that confounds expectations that seek to define and label them in other ways – whether as workers or students (though it must be repeated that these young people were invited to the focus group *because they were promotores/as*, so their collective expression of identity cannot be considered typical of Nicaraguan youth in general; what it does suggest, however, is that, for them, being a *promotor/a* is something important in their lives – a role to be proud of).

Reflecting on the way these young people have developed a positive sense of identity that defies labelling recalls the slogan 'Labels are for jars, not for people', associated with the Disability Rights movement, but used widely elsewhere wherever people resist being labelled (Roets and Goodley 2008; Rymer 2011).[6] This focuses attention on the difference between a label and a badge: A badge is a symbol of identity that you wear by choice, often with pride. You are happy to be identified with the message on your badge and it may form part of your self-image. A label, on the other hand, is put on you by someone else, generally without your permission or approval. The label will determine the image other people have of you and may thus end up becoming part of your self-image (or even taking it over). In the case discussed above, the Nicaraguan adolescents resisted all labels that might be put on them whether as students or workers, while assuming the title of 'Promotor/a' as if it were a badge of honour, speaking of using their skills and knowledge for the common good, to defend rights and build a better future. This can be seen as a validation of CESESMA's rights-based approach to working with adolescents as *promotores/as* through processes of education and empowerment, which might usefully be promoted elsewhere.

## 6.    Can 'intersectionality' offer insights to guide education policy?

Crenshaw's analysis of the struggles of Black women in 1980s USA, which crystallised into the concept now known as '*intersectionality*', has for decades inspired new thinking and new insights across a wide range of situations where people live with multiple and interacting forms of oppression or disadvantage; so it is not surprising that an intersectionality analysis can be applied to Nicaragua's child and adolescent worker-students. As school students, they face multiple difficulties in getting a decent education (Asensio Flórez 2014; Shier et al. 2013). As workers, they face another set of problems struggling for respect, dignity, and fair treatment at work (Corriols and Aragón 2010; Lacayo Parajón et al. 2010; Young Consultants of Santa Martha 2011). However, as school students who also have to work, they face further problems specific to their intersected social roles and the labels that go with them. And this is not just a matter of establishing an identity; it has concrete implications in terms of human rights, equity, and justice.

Though there are studies that consider the real lives of children and adolescents living at the intersection of school student and child worker identities (e.g. Bromley and Mackie 2009; Green 1998; Punch 2003), the specific question raised here – *Can 'intersectionality' offer insights to guide education policy?* – has not been addressed directly. As a starting point, we can point out that, though their needs and interests may be distinct, their human rights are the same as those of every other child and adolescent; and particularly relevant here are the rights to receive a relevant, quality education free from any kind of discrimination, and to be protected from any effects of working that may harm their integrity and development or deny their right to education (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 2, 28, and 32). On this basis alone, a number of specific issues relevant to worker-students can be identified, with corresponding implications for policy development.

One approach which a number of governments have been exploring (including the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education) is to provide alternative schooling arrangements for young workers. In Nicaragua, an increasing number of secondary schools offer weekend classes, so adolescents who are already committed to a full working week do not have to abandon education but can study at weekends. Considering that this involves working a seven-day week, an impressive number of rural adolescents are willing to make the effort. There are also basic education programmes available for adolescents and adults who, for whatever reason, left school at a young age and did not complete primary education (Largaespada, Ríos, and Solís 2010).

Another policy area that can help students who are also workers realise their right to education is the rethinking and updating of the school curriculum to make it relevant to the needs of rural worker-students, in particular by providing vocational options relevant to their working lives; both their current work in the agricultural sector and their aspirations to widen their horizons as they get older. The fact that they may have picked coffee from the age of six does not mean that they have to continue in this occupation forever. Again, this is something the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education has already expressed a commitment to (Barreto Arias et al. 2012; Muhr 2013, 287–288).

A problem that particularly affects children who have to combine schooling with agricultural work is the high rate of school dropout associated with the repeating of grades. Although this happens in many countries, it is particularly acute in Nicaragua's coffee zone, where the opportunity for children to make an essential contribution to their family income occurs during the months of the coffee harvest (November to January), which coincide with the beginning and end of the school year. This means children are unlikely to get the average marks required to pass their grade, and so, when they return to school after the harvest, instead of going up a class, will be made to repeat the same grade over again (Castillo and Fonseca 2013, 23–25). This leads to frustration for both children and parents, with early school dropout the most

likely outcome. Many coffee-picking families adopt a nomadic lifestyle during the harvest, reducing further their children's opportunities to complete their year's schooling (Shier et al. 2013). To reduce the dropout rate, schools in the worst-affected areas are experimenting with adjusting the start and finish dates of the school year to better fit around the coffee harvest, and NGOs are offering informal catch-up activities for children on the plantations (Bazán and Zamudio 2013, 330; Ministerio de Trabajo 2010).

A specific problem which has been identified by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child – and highlighted in its recommendations to the government of Nicaragua – is that there is a gap between the end of obligatory schooling (which is completion of primary school, usually at 11 or 12 years old) and the age for legal employment, which is 14. Although the current government has made great efforts to make secondary education accessible to more rural children (Largaespada, Ríos, and Solís 2010; Muhr 2013), constitutionally, it is only obliged to guarantee universal free education at the primary level. This means that, if they were to follow the letter of the law, many thousands of 12- and 13-year-olds would be unable to either work or study. What are they supposed to do? In its Concluding Observations, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2010) calls on the government to:

> Close the gap between the end of compulsory schooling and the minimum age for employment by extending compulsory education and establishing vocational training to prepare adolescents for skilled work. (15, para. 71f)

Finally, efforts to increase the income-generating capacity of the coffee sector and so improve the earning potential of rural families, take some of the pressure off children to work long hours, and so create more options for successfully combining work and study. This can involve developing the Fair Trade market, producing specialist organic and other ecologically accredited coffees, marketing the Nicaragua brand and developing local processing and packaging for added value (Bacon et al. 2008; Ruben and Zuniga 2011). Children may continue to work on family farms, learning the special skills of quality coffee cultivation, but if their families can be assured a decent income, their doing so need not prevent them from completing their education and opening up alternative life opportunities if that is their goal.

Whilst the Nicaraguan government in its official discourse still adheres to the ILO line on 'eradication of child labour' (GRUN 2010), its willingness to engage with these initiatives suggests that there is an implicit awareness of the intersected roles and identities explored here, even if this intersectionality is not yet acknowledged or properly understood.

What all these aspects of education policy reform have in common is that they are particularly relevant to those school students who are also workers. That is, they are not directed at the 'eradication' of child workers so that all children (and increasing numbers of adolescents) can be identified and dealt with in policy as school students only. On the contrary, they are made possible by the initial acceptance that a great number of young people, and in some places the large majority, are living at the intersection of the student and worker roles.

## 7.  Conclusion

Although the above examples are taken from Nicaragua, all of them have application in other countries where children take on worker and school-student roles at the same time, and so could potentially benefit from alternative schooling arrangements, life-relevant curricula, and grading systems that encourage progression rather that repetition. Also, as the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has repeatedly pointed out, all states must guarantee accessible free education until adolescents reach the official legal working age, and Nicaragua is not the only

one failing in this (Committee on the Rights of the Child 2006). Finally, it is the globally generated structural causes of poverty more than anything else which put pressure on children to combine school and work, so the search for sustainable solutions, crossing all intersections, means these causes must also be addressed (Cook 2012; Hart 2008).

In order to develop effective social and educational policies that respect the rights of children and adolescents who are both school students and workers, it is important to understand their real lives, and recognise that they may embrace this intersected identity, rather than seek to be rescued from it. New research is needed that starts from this recognition, and so avoids the many false assumptions that are found in the literature on this topic. The most obvious false assumption is the one mentioned at the start of this paper: the assumption that children and adolescents are either full-time workers or full-time students. Another is that they would all be better off if they were to cease working and only attend school; and a third is that their challenging lifestyle of combining school work and farm work must have been imposed on them through their oppression, as it could not be their preferred and rational choice.

The 'intersectionality lens' referred to above may be helpful in framing such new research. Knowledge and understanding of these children and adolescents' lives, the pressures they are under and the decisions they make, can then be applied to the reformulation of education policies, and the reengineering of education systems to respond to their needs and so realise their human rights. In particular, such changes can help to tackle the direct and indirect discrimination that young worker-students often face in school systems as they are currently constructed. The kinds of initiatives already underway in Nicaragua provide a foundation that can be built on.

Though the adolescents who participated in the empirical study rejected labelling as either students or workers, the data they provided showed how these roles intersect in the reality of their daily lives. Though they can be described as belonging to either category: as workers or as students, or as both, Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality suggests that to understand this reality, they are better thought of as worker-students: neither one nor the other, nor both, but as members of a distinct intersected category.

## Notes

1. Following the usual terminology in Spanish, 'children and adolescents' is used here in preference to expressions more common in English, such as 'children and young people', as it is clearly defined in Nicaraguan law and custom (children are 0–12, adolescents from 13 to their 18th birthday), whereas 'young people' is ambiguous and often misleading.
2. In a few cases (hopefully by mistake and not by intent), it is the child workers themselves who are to be eradicated, as, for example, on the website of the Kerala-based 'Good Shepherd Trust', which proudly offers a service of 'Eradication of child workers'. (http://www.goodshepherdtrust.org/index.php).

3.  An illustration of this can be seen in CESESMA (2012a, 33) where an adolescent girl footballer depicts herself resisting the pointing fingers accusing her of being unfeminine.
4.  The present author admits to having in the past labelled these young people 'child workers', as it is an attention-grabber amongst British and Irish coffee-drinkers.
5.  Although four of the participants had turned 18 and thus were technically no longer adolescents as defined in Nicaraguan law, they were not far out of their adolescence and for convenience, the group will be referred to collectively as adolescents.
6.  A striking example by Irish street artist ADW can be seen here: http://irishstreetart.blogspot.co.uk/2013/02/blog-post.html

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