

Intersecting identities of children in Nicaragua – “We all work and we all go to school”

“You’re not going
because you’ve hardly
picked anything.
Look at your
empty basket”



Drawing by child coffee-plantation worker



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Overview

1. Children forging identities in Nicaragua
2. The problematic “child worker” identity
3. “Intersected identity”
4. Labels and badges
5. Crenshaw’s original concept of intersectionality
6. Implications for social and educational policy

1. Children forging identities in Nicaragua

- ☐ Gender: children accept, question, challenge or reject expected masculine and feminine role norms, e.g. →
- ☐ Ethnic and national identity, place of origin (belonging)
- ☐ Indigenous identity
- ☐ Rural identity
- ☐ Economic status (class?)
- ☐ Religion
- ☐ Political allegiance
- ☐ Age-group: child, adolescent, young person, adult
- ☐ Organised (with CESESMA)
- ☐ School student
- ☐ Coffee plantation or farm worker



Drawing by adolescent girl who likes to play football

Focus on the last two of these:

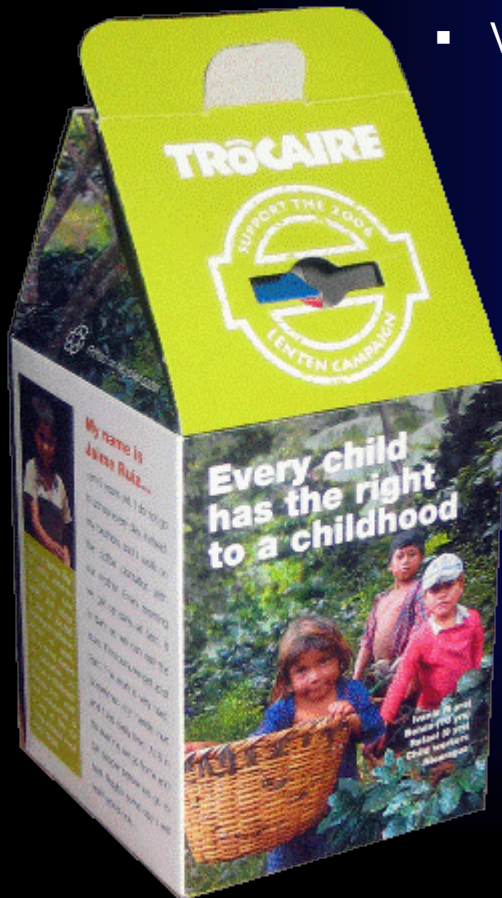
Most rural children in Nicaragua have an intersected identity, identifying themselves as both **school student** and **child worker** (Shier 2010, Shier et al 2013).



2. The problematic “child worker” identity

Most of the literature seems to suppose that a child must be one or the other. “Child worker” becomes a defining category, whose members are problematic:

- Victims to be rescued



*Trócaire lenten appeal moneybox 2006
(children photographed on a Nicaraguan
coffee plantation)*



Shoe-shine boys in Matagalpa

- Part of a social evil (child labour) that is to be eradicated

- In the economics literature (which is the biggest part of it): As a variable in equations defining the functioning of the labour market.

$$\log f(y_{ij}\beta, a_h) = \sum_i y_{hi} x_{hi} \beta + a_h \sum_i y_{hi} - \sum_i \log(1 + \exp(x_{hi}\beta + a_h)), \quad (1)$$

Jensen and Nielsen (1997)

$$\frac{\partial L}{\partial b} = \frac{\partial S^*}{\partial(w-b)} + \frac{\partial H^*}{\partial(w-b)} - S \frac{\partial(H+S)}{\partial[wT + Y(\mathbf{Z})]}.$$

Ravallion and Wodon (2000)

$$P_j = \frac{e^{\alpha_j + \beta_j X}}{\sum_k e^{\alpha_k + \beta_k X_k}}; j, k = 1, 2, 3$$

Cockburn (2001)

- Members of a radical social movement in a heroic struggle against oppression, and in defence of their “right to work”. This romanticised view becomes a holy grail for advocates of children’s autonomous participation (Cussiánich and Méndez 2008).



Child workers' demonstration in Colombia

(If they happen to work on a city street, they are elevated to the even more romantic category of “street children”, with a whole new set of constructed meanings attached) (Bemak 1996, Bar-on 1997).



On the other hand, the identity of “school student” has almost universal approval:



3. “Intersected identity”

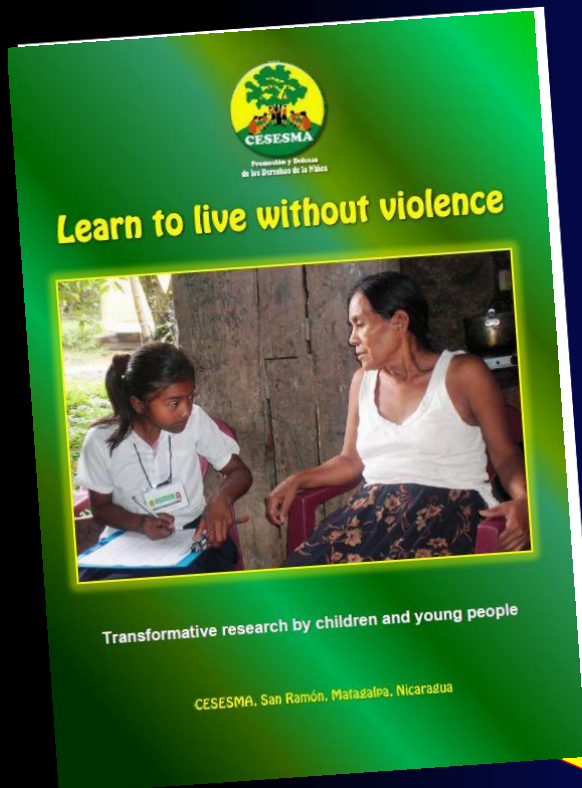
The reality in Nicaragua – particularly rural Nicaragua – is that very few children are entirely one or the other. Children live in the intersection of the two identities.

- Although it suits people like me to talk about them as “child workers”, they themselves are more comfortable with the “school student” identity as they know this is socially approved.



- They are often reticent about publicly accepting the “child worker” identity – because by the time we get to discuss this with them, they have realised that the “child worker” identity is problematic – even having sussed that there is a plan afoot to “eradicate” them.

There are examples in children's research reports, presented in their own words:



Reports by teams of child researchers in Nicaragua, published by CESESMA in 2012

See how they prioritise the student role. It is often others (like NGOs) who see them as first and foremost “child workers” and therefore a problem (to be “eradicated”).

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Part 1: Who are we, and how did we do our research?



We are 18 children and young people from four rural communities in the Yasica Sur area in the municipality of San Ramón, Matagalpa: Santa Martha, El Carmen, La Corona and La Grecia. We are from 12 to 16 years old. 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.

We have formed a team of researchers to look for solutions to the social problems that affect our communities.

In our first meeting we discussed what “research” means and the role of a researcher.

In our second meeting we planned to decide which groups of people we would interview. We asked the children and young people, parents and community leaders. Then we drew up the lists of questions to ask each group.

Finally we discussed and agreed on how to carry out the interviews and how many people to go to interview.



4. Labels and badges



Mural by Dublin street artist "ADW"

This way of thinking about how children form their identity is based on learning from the Disability Rights movement in the 1980s, and their resistance to being "labelled"

(Roets and Goodley 2008).

- ❑ 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 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).

5. Crenshaw's original concept of intersectionality

As a lawyer, Kimberlé Crenshaw wanted to understand why, in the 1980s, despite substantial civil rights legislation and gender equity legislation, Black women in the USA were still unable to get justice in the courts. She suggested it was because they found themselves at an intersection, where neither road – the road of civil rights for black people, or the road of women's rights – led to justice.

(Crenshaw 1989, 1991)



Professor Crenshaw speaking at Hampshire College, Massachusetts in October 2013

We can apply similar thinking to Nicaragua's child student/workers:

- As school students they face multiple difficulties in getting a decent education.



- As workers, they face another set of problems struggling for respect, dignity and fair treatment.



- As school students who also have to work, they face further problems specific to their intersected social roles and the identity (labels?) that goes with them.

We should research the real lives of children who are both school students and workers (and who may accept this intersected identity, rather than seek to be rescued from it).



6. Implications for social and educational policy

- Deal with the gap between the end of primary school and legal working age.
- Develop vocational education: relevant to the reality of today, but not closing off options for rural children who have the will to succeed in the wider world.
- Alternative educational programmes for working children: Saturday schools etc.
- Fair Trade (increased family income = less pressure to work long hours).
- Improve the quality of schooling to offer better outcomes, so parents and children believe in the long-term value of education.

Committee on the Rights of the Child, Fifty-fifth session

13 September-1 October 2010

Concluding observations: Nicaragua

71. The Committee recommends that the State party:

...(f) 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;

*Extract from UN Committee on the Rights of the Child
Concluding Observations to the Government of
Nicaragua 2010, pushing for changes in education
policy to recognise needs of child student/workers.*



A practical example: Children Lead the Way

“Save the Children’s five-year ‘Children Lead the Way’ program aims to secure the rights of girls and boys to protection, education, and survival in Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Kenya, Nicaragua and Peru.

The program promotes the fulfillment of the rights of children who work. We aim to ensure that children who work in the five countries have access to quality education, learn skills that will improve their futures, and are protected from exploitation.

We are also ensuring that their voices are heard in decisions and debates that affect them at the local, national and international levels.”



(Taken from Save the Children Canada website)

The program in Nicaragua:



- Ensures children and youth who work have access to either primary, vocational or technical education, and provides them with follow-up extra-curricular support.
- Introduces new marketable skills into education to ensure improved opportunities for children who work.
- Together with the Ministry of Education, supports alternative education centres to improve learning and work opportunities for children who work.
- Improves the quality of education through the training of teachers on models of alternative education, as well as life skills, gender equality and children's rights.



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