Character development of preschool children through participation in domestic work: a case study of four boys in rural Slovenia

Barbara Turk Niskač

Barbara Turk Niskač : Faculty of Education and Culture, Tampere University, Marie Curie research fellow, barbara.turkniskac@tuni.fi, https://www.tuni.fi/en/barbara-turkniskac

DOI: 10.25518/2034-8517.3542

Résumé :

Développement du caractère des enfants d'âge préscolaire par la participation au travail domestique : une étude de cas de quatre garçons en Slovénie rurale. En Slovénie, l'idée que le travail soit éducatif en ayant des répercussions sur le développement du caractère a une longue histoire qui remonte au moins aussi loin que la pédagogie de la période des Lumières. L'introduction du concept de travail éducatif – une valeur culturelle attribuée à la participation des enfants au travail – met en lumière la manière dont les enfants d'âge préscolaire s'engagent dans le travail domestique par la participation active, l'apprentissage, l'observation et le jeu. L'étude ethnographique examine comment la valeur éducative du travail se manifeste dans un cadre rural contemporain en Slovénie où les enfants sont exposés à différents types de travail dans la vie quotidienne. Compte tenu de la motivation des enfants à participer et apprendre à travers les interactions sociales, ainsi que les pratiques d'éducation des enfants, et les significations qui sont attribuées au travail dans différents contextes politiques, sociaux et économiques, le travail peut être considéré simultanément comme un puissant agent de socialisation, un instrument disciplinaire potentiel et une occupation significative inhérente à l'existence humaine.

Mots-clés : socialisation, petite enfance, travail, apprentissage par l'observation, jeu

Abstract :

In Slovenia, the notion of educational work impacting character development dates at least to the pedagogy of the Enlightenment period. By introducing the concept of educational work – ascribing cultural value to children's participation in work – we can better grasp how preschool children engaging in domestic work learn through active participation, observation and play. This study examines the educational value of work in a contemporary Slovenian rural setting, where children are daily exposed to various work. Considering children's motivation to participate and learn through social interactions, childrearing practices, and meanings attributed to work in different political, social and economic contexts work can be seen simultaneously as a powerful socializing agent, a potential disciplining instrument and as meaningful activity integral to human existence.

Keywords : socialization, early childhood, work, learning through observation, play

Abstracto :

El desarrollo del carácter de los niños de preescolar a través de la participación en el trabajo

doméstico: Estudio de caso de cuatro niños varones en la Eslovenia rural. En Eslovenia, la idea de que el trabajo es educativo, teniéndo repercusiones en el desarrollo del carácter, posee una larga historia que se remonta tan lejos como la pedagogía del Siglo de las Luces. La introducción del concepto de trabajo educativo – es un valor cultural atribuido a la participación de los niños en el trabajo – destaca la forma en la que los niños de preescolar se comprometen en el trabajo doméstico para la participación activa, el aprendizaje, la observación y el juego. El estudio etnográfico examina cómo se manifiesta el valor educativo del trabajo, en un marco rural contemporáneo de Eslovenia, donde los niños son expuestos a diferentes tipos de trabajo en la vida cotidiana. Tomando en cuenta la motivación de los niños para participar y aprender, a través de las interacciones sociales, así como, de las prácticas de educación de los niños y los significados atribuidos al trabajo en diferentes contextos políticos, sociales y económicos, el trabajo puede ser considerado, simultáneamente, como un poderoso agente de socialización, un instrumento potencial de disciplina y una ocupación significativa inherente en la existencia humana.

Palabras clave : socialización, primera infancia, trabajo, aprendizaje a través de la observación, juego

2022

Introduction

In the hegemonic representations informed by Eurocentric ideals and values, children's work is most commonly associated with economic contribution, particularly in situations related to poverty and the Global South (Liebel & Budde 2017). This article disrupts the predominant understanding of children's work by presenting three case studies of how four very young children participate in daily family work. In drawing attention to the concept of *educational work* in early childhood socialization, I am particularly interested in the meaning attributed to work (Harris 2007; Spittler 2010) which is embedded in social relationships rather than in the function of work in its economic rationality. In my analysis, I draw attention to specific historical trajectories, which are characterised in Slovenia by late industrialization, domestic agricultural economy, and (semi)agricultural lifestyles, as well as to the value attributed to work in the socialist Yugoslavia, and the continuity and change of the value of work in the context of post-socialist transitions to global neoliberal market economy.

Focusing on forms of work in children's everyday lives, I am interested in why and how preschool children (aged from two to six years) participate in everyday work, and how adults and children themselves perceive such work (see also Turk Niskač 2021a). Under the influence of capitalist ethics, work and play, work and leisure, as well as work and family life are often perceived as opposing each other. While play is typically understood as an intrinsically motivated process where the end product is experience itself, work is understood as goal-oriented and confined to the adult world (Sutton-Smith 1997). Yet ethnographic studies suggest that it is often difficult to disentangle work, play, and learning in children's daily lives (Chick 2010; Lancy 2018).

In contemporary "Western" societies, work, either domestic or outside the household, is often understood as interfering with the children's right to schooling and as contradicting the notion of protected childhood (Liebel & Budde 2017; see also Convention on the rights of the child 1989). Furthermore, schooling and extracurricular activities take the role of socializing young children into competent adult worker citizens (Mayall 2007). Although the International Labour Organisation (ILO n.d.) and UNICEF (UNICEF n.d.) recently acknowledged positive aspects of children's work within family as opposed to harmful and exploitative work in capitalistic production, scholars acknowledge that such distinction is problematic as it is often not easy to draw boundaries between the two (Invernizzi 2007; Abebe 2009).

Anthropological studies of child work acknowledge different situations in which children work and evaluate them in relation to social, economic and political factors (Reynolds 1991; Niewenhuys 1994; Schlemmer 2000). On the other hand, they emphasize that children's work within family settings or domestic economy is often tied to socialisation and the learning of new skills (Bolin 2006; Grasseni 2009; Bourdillon & Spittler 2012; Katz 2012; Lancy 2016).

The Slovenian case study reveals a possible alternative conceptualization of work and play in childhood different to the predominant Western conception, which sees these as opposed to each other (see Harris 2007). In Slovenia, we can trace a long history of attributing educational value

to children's participation in work. Here, work and play in childhood are not necessarily viewed as mutually exclusive, but can be seen as interconnected, with work impacting growing up just as much as play. Slovene developmental psychologists define play as a free and voluntary activity, which is not goal-oriented, and work as goal-oriented; yet they emphasize that in early childhood both often intertwine and are difficult to distinguish as children can also engage in work on a free and voluntary basis and transform work into playful activity (Horvat & Magajna 1989; Marjanovič Umek 2001).

I am particularly interested in the idea that it is educational for children to participate in daily domestic work, which took many forms throughout history and, to a certain extent, remains present today. Child-rearing experts, special education teachers and psychologists (e.g. Juhant & Levc 2013) as well as kindergarten and primary school teachers in Slovenia often express the opinion that it is important to involve children in daily household work at home so they can develop a work ethic which will prove useful in school performance and in adult life.

The concept of *educational work* I employ, refers to the Slovene term *vzgoja* (upbringing, *Erziehung* in German, *vospitanie* in Russian), which differs from *izobraževanje* (education in a more formal sense), and implies an adult's intended and unintended guidance of the child in their moral, personal, social, aesthetical, physical and spiritual advancement (Skubic Ermenc 2015). In this context, the participation of children in work is not aimed at production and economic contribution. Instead, this concept maintains that through participation in work, children's characters are formed in a culturally desirable way. But since, in turn, the resulting characteristics such as diligence, responsibility and independence should ideally enhance their economic contribution in adulthood, the aspects of socialization and discipline are undoubtedly at stake here (Foucault 1995).

The idea that work is educational can be traced back to the pedagogy of the Enlightenment period, which rejected idleness and promoted diligence in service of the state considering work as a means of personal development and of disciplining the individual (Makarovič 1995; Studen 2012). Parental manuals in the 19th and beginning of 20th century emphasized the importance of play in children's development, yet parents were also advised to gradually and invisibly introduce their children to work through which the children's personalities were to be formed by gaining key social virtues such as order, discipline, responsibility, patience, kindness, helpfulness, and independence (see Stupanova 1932).

Situating ethnographic study

In proposing the concept of educational work, I draw on ethnographic study that observed the interconnectedness of work, play, and learning in early childhood in Slovenia from the perspectives of parents, kindergarten educators, and preschool children themselves.

I conducted an ethnographic study in 2010 and 2011 in a kindergarten in a rural setting, and, in 2013, in a kindergarten in an urban setting, on the outskirts of the capital city, Ljubljana. The study was primarily set within the two kindergartens.1 The methods employed were: participant observation and video ethnography in kindergartens, semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers, and participatory photography and photo elicitation interviews with parents, teachers and children aged three to six years. A total of 6 kindergarten teachers, 35 parents (27 mothers and 8 fathers), 3 grandmothers and 38 children aged 2 to 6 years (18 girls and 20 boys) participated in this study.

This article focuses on the participation of preschool children in daily family activities in a rural setting. I am referring mainly to the daily work tasks in the household, which range from agricultural tasks to housework, although the article is taken from a more comprehensive study that also covered daily chores performed at kindergartens (see Turk Niskač 2021a).

The rural area is situated 90 kilometres outside Ljubljana in a demographically endangered, scarcely populated area. The area comprises several scattered villages and a settlement with approximately 100 inhabitants serving as an administrative centre with a school, a kindergarten, a church, a grocery store, a petrol station, two bars, tourist accommodation and two small-size manufactures, which opened in the 1970s. One manufactured tools and the other garments, providing employment for the majority of the local working population. In recent decades, the trend of de-industrialization and de-agrarization has accelerated; both manufactures faced downsizing and the clothing manufactory finally closed in 2011. While some inhabitants faced unemployment, others found employment in a town 20 kilometres away. In recent years, due to well-preserved environment and biodiversity, tourism also gained importance as a source of income for the local population.

Slovenia is a country in Central Europe of around 2 million habitants, where the distinction between rural and urban settlements and lifestyles is often blurred (Urbanc 2002). As opposed to Southern Europe, where case studies show subsistence agriculture livelihoods facing a major break with the past (see Narotzky 2020), in Slovenia this did not occur. In part this can be attributed to late industrialisation and the politics of socialist Yugoslavia. Society was predominantly agricultural until World War II. Increased industrialisation did not begin until the period between the two world wars, with the bulk of changes introduced in post-World War II Yugoslavia. Yugoslav modernization unfolded according to the principles of polycentrism, which led to the development of several small industrialised centres scattered throughout the countryside. This contributed to the fact that the country did not undergo massive urbanization or a subsequent push of rural people out of the countryside (the capital city, Ljubljana, presently counts 295,504 inhabitants), which would increase alienation from the land (Knežević Hočevar & Černič Istenič 2010). A significant number of part-time farmers emerged, who performed waged labour while continuing to cultivate the land for their own consumption or for additional income. At the same time, arable land has been shrinking throughout the 20th and into 21st century, and forests and meadows are overgrowing that which was cultivated land a generation ago (Urbanc 2002; Knežević Hočevar & Černič Istenič 2010). Yet, both in the studied rural area and in wider Slovenia, it remains common for families to own orchards, vineyards, forest, meadows, fields, vegetable gardens and/or raise livestock for personal consumption in addition to having jobs. The work is also often distributed among members of the extended family (particularly grandparents) as several generations often live together or in close vicinity to each other. Furthermore, until recently, growing vegetables for household consumption has also been common in urban centres, including the capital city.

In the 1950s, Yugoslavia condemned exploitative child labour (for example children from poorer farmers toiling for wealthier ones as nannies or shepherds). This was seen as a break with pre-war emerging capitalist social relations, and solidified school education as the children's main obligation (Erdei 2004; Jeraj 2012). While the agricultural domestic economy framed people's identities according to labour relations and land ownership (Vilfan 1961), socialist Yugoslavia framed work (especially work with one's own hands and socially useful work) as an esteemed social value strongly linked to one's identity as well as to one's well-being (Vodopivec 2020).

According to 1970s feminist theories, capitalism distinguished between waged and unwaged work, with the latter comprising housework, reproductive work, and other work related with social reproduction. It is precisely the unwaged condition of childrearing, housework, and other daily work taking place in the private domain of the household that renders it as not work (Federici 2012). I propose that children's work is similarly understood as non-work in modern contemporary societies because childhood is generally accepted to be limited to play and schooling.

Yet socialist state perceived work as inseparable from life itself, which was also reflected in the children's upbringing and the formal school system. The educational value of work was particularly emphasized because work was seen as crucial in the development of the children's characters and in providing practical knowledge they would need in later life (Čerin *et al*. 1983; Erdei 2004). While inclusion of women in the labour force was seen as crucial to their emancipation in socialist Yugoslavia (Bonfiglioli 2017; Sitar 2020), women's unpaid work within social reproduction gained visibility with second-wave feminist groups in Yugoslavia and "was recognized as a pillar of the gendered division of labour" (Bonfiglioli 2017). The children's participation in work was, however, not taken into account by feminist theorists, nor was educational value attributed to their participation. Yet, in their childhood, the majority of my interlocutors who grew up in Yugoslavia participated in housework and other forms of work within the household, regardless of their socio-economic background, gender, irrelevant of whether they lived in an urban or rural area. In the realm of socialist everyday life, this was seen not only as school for future life, but also as a way in which each member contributed to the needs of the community.

The extent of the children's contribution has, however, continually declined across the last three generations due to modernization, mechanization of agricultural work, and increased emphasis on the importance of children's schooling and leisure. While three generations ago all members of agricultural as well as working class households including children participated in work and in the domestic economy as a means of survival, the generation of today's parents worked less, while the children's contribution in work today is in fact quite marginal compared to their other activities – play, school, extracurricular activities, and digital platforms, which are at the forefront of children's daily experiences (see also Turk Niskač 2021b).

Educational work in practice

Both in the urban and rural settings, the majority of parents involved in this study acknowledged that involving children in daily family tasks helped them learn skills such as responsibility and independence. They also believed participation in work helped the children develop work ethics, a positive self-image, self-confidence, a sense of pride, and one of belonging and closeness with the family. They did not see children's participation in work in terms of economic contribution or as a means of learning gender or other social roles, which is often the case (see also Bourdillon 2012; Montgomery 2010); rather, they emphasized the educational value of work with implications for character development.

Such a view of work is not new; ethnographic studies from other research contexts show that participation in work can give children a sense of inner satisfaction, a sense of control over their lives, and the sense that they are making a meaningful contribution to their family (Bourdillon 2012; Gaskins 2008; Spittler 2012). Ochs and Izquierdo (2009) point out that physical participation in housework helps children develop compassion and that learning these tasks also teaches children moral responsibility.

The concept of educational work implies a somewhat ambiguous understanding of work; during the course of my ethnographic study, my interlocutors in both the rural and urban settings perceived preschool children as too young to work. Although parents included children in their daily tasks, they did not consider their children's participation real work. Mina, a mother of two living in an urban setting said it was good for children to participate in daily work: "he [her four-year-old son] feels important, that he counts too, he is a person with a role in the family who also contributes to the family." Here, the notion of work has an implicitly educational role with parents ascribing greater importance to including children in the work process than to the work getting done properly and in time. Thus, work was aimed more at education in terms of children's character development rather than actual productive contribution. None of the children in this study were under any actual obligation to work apart from cleaning after themselves: clearing the table after meals, putting away dirty clothes and toys in their rooms. Nevertheless, children did participate in many other daily tasks in the course of family life. Parents specifically pointed out that the children participate in daily work on their own initiative exclusively, and usually also abandon the work task on their own, thus emphasizing that this is not "real" work by the definition which defines the latter as an obligation.2

Lifestyles in rural and urban settings differed as did the types of work to which the children were exposed. In an urban area, children were mostly exposed to housework inside the house, while in rural areas, in addition to housework, a lot of work was also done outside: either in hobby workshops, in the orchards and vineyards, or in the woods and vegetable gardens. Therefore, the rural way of life offered children more varied opportunities to observe and/or participate in daily work in a family setting (for a more detailed account on the comparison of the rural and urban setting see Turk Niskač 2018). The parents from the rural setting mostly saw work as an integral part of life. They emphasized that it is important that children acquire "a joy for work" and that they "find pleasure in work." Although the majority of the parents from the urban setting also acknowledged educational aspects of work, a handful did not place much importance on children participating in work as a virtue. They emphasized that they hoped their children would learn how to express their individuality and take care of themselves. More than diligence as a virtue, they emphasized savviness: "One has to be savvy in life, not diligent." This points to changes in the conceptualizations of educational work, which is being transformed by current neoliberal ideologies to coincide with entrepreneurial work ethics. Under this paradigm, socialization practices are shifting from the promotion of diligence to the promotion of self-realization and happiness, which can only be achieved by nurturing the true self (Bröckling 2015; Ortner 2016).

Focusing on the experiences of boys, other data gathered during the ethnographic study in both the rural area and in Ljubljana, suggests that the gender of the child at this age did not play a significant role in the kind of work they participated in. Furthermore, my postdoctoral study conducted in 2019-2020 with primary school children3 suggests that, as children grow older, their participation in work at home remains valued as an educational endeavour, and their gender still does not play a significant role in their participation in work within family (for a more detailed account including primary school children's participation in work within household see Turk Niskač 2021b). This perhaps points to the emancipation of the role of work within the family. On the other hand, to a certain extent agricultural work among adults remains gendered (for example, more labour intensive work such as cutting wood and preparing firewood for the winter is in the domain of men, while maintaining vegetable gardens is usually in the domain of women). In the past, among the generation of present-day grandparents, division of labour was strongly gendered, and

the kind of work they were expected to participate in socialized children into specific gender and other social roles.

Class differences also figure in the socialization processes and parental approaches to children's individuality (Evans 2006; Lareau 2003). Although my study showed certain differences in how parents from different social classes perceived children and their needs and work itself (see Turk Niskač 2018), the idea that participating in work within the family was educational for children was ubiquitous across all social classes in both the rural and urban setting. One of the more affluent families from Ljubljana (the father worked in diplomacy and the mother was a university professor), which participated both in my PhD and postdoctoral study, for example, employed a cleaning lady. And yet, since the parents attributed educational value to children's participation in domestic work, all three children: two university students and 11-year-old Marta, were assigned obligations such as cleaning their rooms, bathrooms, stairs, and vacuum cleaning. Beyond social class and the urban-rural divide, parents evaluated the inclusion of their children in everyday work according to their own childhood experiences and memories of participating in work. In both settings, irrelevant of their education or profession, the majority of my interlocutors had childhood experience of participating in work and now, as adults, evaluated this experience as mostly positive (although they did not always necessarily like it as children).

Although the idea of work as an educational tool was present in both settings studied, parental approach to the participation of children in daily work was not homogenous. Three case studies of child-rearing practices (and various degrees of children's participation in work, learning through observation and play in early childhood) demonstrate how socializing practices involving work differed even among families which attributed similar importance to work as an educational tool and which shared the same social and living environment. While some families actively engaged children in daily work from an early age, others believed in learning through observation.

Lenart: active participation

Some parents adhering to the principle of engaging children in work allowed their children to actively participate in daily chores from an early age. They maintained that the motivation to participate was primarily the child's own, though they also facilitated the children's participation, because they believed it to be good for them. Lenart (2 years and 2 months old) was Ana- (born in 1967, employed in public administration in a nearby town) and Martin's (born in 1968, employed in a tool factory in the rural area) only child. The family resided in the village in which Martin himself had grown up. When he was a child, they had a small farm, four cows, and an ox. All family members participated in farm work. Martin recalls that children started out by helping with small tasks and gradually took on more demanding work: "We worked all the time, we had to. My father had a job, and there was too much work for my mum alone. Our obligations increased as we grew older, but we were never given work that would be too difficult for us children." Although the work was time- and energy consuming, Martin now considers it a positive experience because it enabled him to gain a "work ethic."

At the time of this study, Martin's family did not run a farm. However, they still owned a few pastures, a forest, a vineyard, and a vegetable garden, all of which required a certain amount of work. Martin believed his son's childhood to be better than his own; the family spent more time together and would often take trips to the seaside, mountains, or go to the swimming pool. Although parents did

not expect him to do farm work, Martin noted that Lenart showed interest in all things farm related: "He wants to be in the tractor, spending two or three hours in it at a time. He constantly wants to wear the forest helmet, try out the chainsaw." Lenart wanted to participate in everything he saw his father do: "If I ride the bicycle, he wants to go with me. If I want to mow the lawn, he wants to do it too." Indeed, Martin let Lenart join him in many chores: tractor rides, working on a wooden table in his workshop, cleaning up, working in the forest, they would go around the village together looking at tractors and excavators at work. Lenart had his own toolbox. At the age of two, he could distinguish and imitate different machine sounds: a chainsaw, the neighbour's motorcycle, a tractor, a car. Ana included Lenart in her work as well: together they emptied the trash bin, watered flowers, washed dishes, and worked on the vegetable garden, with Lenart using his own miniature rake. Aside from joining his parents in their daily chores, Lenart enjoyed playing with sand, on his balance bike, in the toy car, toy tractor, toy excavator, and observing plants and animals.

Children are eager to participate in meaningful work with people who are important to them from an early age. However, as Gaskins observed (2003, 2008), this is not in itself enough; adults need to acknowledge the children's inner motivation and enable them to observe, experiment and participate. Although Lenart's parents believed that he was too young to provide actual meaningful help with the work, they thought it was beneficial for Lenart to be included in various daily tasks in order to learn skills, which he would need later in life. Lenart's parents allowed him to actively participate in many of their working obligations. They emphasized that the motivation to participate in working obligations was purely Lenart's own. However, they acknowledged his willingness to participate and enabled him to be included.

Contemporary theories acknowledge that socialization is a two-way process where "children are involved, as much as are their teachers, as active and creative participants in the learning process" (Ingold 2007: 113). According to Michael Tomasello, around their first birthdays, or soon after they begin to walk, children "are already cooperative and helpful in many, though obviously not all, situations. And they do not learn this from adults; it comes naturally." (2009: 4) Tomasello also notes that children later become more selective "about whom to help, inform, and share with, and they also learn to manage the impression they make on others – their public reputation and self – as a way of influencing the actions of those others toward themselves" (2009: 43). Ethnographic studies demonstrate that societies in which family represents an economic unit build upon the children's early eagerness to cooperate to slowly increase the parents' expectations about the children's work and gradually assign the children more work obligations (Chick 2010; Gaskins 2008; Little and Lancy 2016; Lancy 2018). In this vein, Lenart's case study also demonstrated the interplay between the child's inner motivation to participate in the activities of its carers and the educational value attribute to work by parents.

Yet parents letting their children participate in work is by no means ubiquitous. For safety reasons or simply because it was more efficient, both Ana and Martin tackled the more demanding tasks in the garden, forest, or those involving the tractor or chainsaw on their own. They also both set their work obligations aside when Lenart needed attention and wanted to play. Both gave priority to his play when necessary. This echoes data gathered in families with older children, where play and schooling were also prioritised over work, marking a break with the agricultural domestic economy of the previous generations, where children's participation in work often took precedence over play and schooling. Comparing children's participation in work across generations, today's generation participates much more loosely and is more emancipated than their parents or grandparents were.

Peter and Erik: learning through observation and play

Involving children in their work was obviously more time consuming and required a lot of patience and indulgence on the part of the parents. Not all parents in the rural area actively involved children in their work. Some parents stated that preschool children were too young to participate in work tasks and found it more effective to do the work alone. This does not mean, however, that children were entirely excluded from daily work. Parents placed emphasis on playing and learning through observation; they allowed the child to integrate the work they observed into their play and allowed the child to play with work tools, for example a hoe or a hammer. Ethnographic studies demonstrate that learning through observation is a human activity, which can particularly flourish when adults continually practice working activities in front of the children (Gaskins & Paradise 2010; Köhler 2012; Lancy 2012).

Twins Peter and Erik (2 years and 11 months old) grew up with parents, two older siblings and their grandmother. They lived on the same farm their father Ivan grew up on, and up until 1986, the family mostly lived on farming. Ivan was born in 1965 and at the time of this study worked at a nearby tool factory. He was the youngest of three brothers. As a young child, he did not participate in farm work; he only started taking part in it towards the end of primary school. He would accompany a calf to pasture, help with harvesting cucumbers, clean the barn, and the like. Ivan's mother indicated that children were always there for farm work: "they helped out if needed, but they also had fun and watched what we were doing." She also added that children "weren't excluded," implying that participation in work integrated children into the network of intergenerational relationships within the household. Work wasn't something Ivan remembered as a pleasant activity: "it's not a child's top priority, although it was interesting in a way," acknowledging also its positive side. At the time of this study, the family no longer owned any cattle, they maintained a small vegetable field for their own consumption, and a stretch of forest.

Ivan didn't include his children in agricultural work, he thought them too young to help. Though he contemplated starting to include his oldest 13-year-old son, he did not consider him strong and mature enough yet at the time: "If I go to the forest, I need to work there. I know that he would want to go home after an hour, and then I wouldn't know whether I should work in the woods or look after him, he would only distract me." As noted earlier, Ivan himself only started participating in work at about the same age. It appears that in this family, active participation wasn't the focus of young children's daily experience. Both Ivan's own and in his children's childhoods were centered on observing adults at work of which they had ample opportunity.

Both Ivan and his wife Eva (born in 1976, garment-worker) agreed that children are astute observers from a very early age and eager to imitate adults' activities. Ivan emphasized: "I can see that they see a lot; they see what you're doing and then they want to do it as well. For example, Peter knows very well how to turn on a rotary lawn mower. He just follows you with his gaze and sees what you're doing." Parents allowed children, including the youngest ones, Peter and Erik, to use work tools in their play: "If the rotary lawn mower is outside, they go around the courtyard with it. They lug the brush cutter around by themselves. As soon as I started using it in the spring, they would immediately fetch the protective gear, the helmet, and play with the brush cutter in the yard. Peter pulled the string and imitated its noise." While Peter and Erik only played with it, their older brother could already cut grass by himself. Thus, Peter and Erik's childhoods were expressly focused on observing adults and older siblings at work and incorporating the observed activities in their play. Lenart participated in both the work done by his father and his mother; likewise,

the work Peter and Erik incorporated into their play wasn't strongly gender-defined either. For example, they also played changing the doll's diapers and sweeping the floor.

Although Peter and Erik had plenty of toys, their mother specified that the children were more interested in the work adults did: "they don't play with toys very much. They prefer to do what we do, they observe, they are interested in machines, they are always in our way." In this family, parents acknowledged that play was the primary activity of preschool children. They also believed that at this age, children were too young to participate in work, although they noticed that children wanted to be involved. They acknowledged that children learnt a lot through observation and allowed them to play with tools, such as a hoe or a lawn mower, thus transforming working activities into play.

Emil: going back to the land

While the families in the first two examples lived in the same rural area and showed similar intergenerational continuity in attitudes towards children's work participation, the case study, which focuses on Emil (2 years and 6 months old), observes an affluent family that had moved from the capital to the rural area. Emil's parents, Maja (born in 1984, working for a family business) and Simon (born in 1979, working for a law firm) both grew up in the city, yet their practices and attitudes towards their children's participation in work were very similar to those of local families in the rural surroundings. The family moved into Maja's grandmother's house to which Maja had formed an attachment through her childhood memories. Though Maja grew up in the capital city, she regularly spent summer holidays with her grandparents. Simon who also grew up in the city, in an apartment building, spent a lot of time at his grandparent's farm; there he was able to climb into a tractor and help his grandparents with various tasks. Many of my interlocutors who grew up in cities had similar childhood ties to the countryside and rural work. Maja and Simon appreciated their own experience to the extent that they decided to move to the countryside because they considered the rural environment more suitable for their children's upbringing.

Maja and Simon intentionally included Emil in various segments of daily work. Maja explained: "I try to dedicate a lot of my time to the kids. I try to include Emil in things I do as much as possible. We cook, make pizza, clean the dishes, hang the laundry, pick apples. He participates according to his own interests, sometimes he isn't interested at all, or he is interested for a while but then loses interest and goes away." Emil helped his dad with central heating, stacking the firewood, and mowing the lawn. Simon considered it especially important for Emil to participate in these activities and acknowledge them as part of daily life: "He has to become familiar with these tasks, they shouldn't be a thing that gets done by my parents or someone else. I think he has to see that this kind of work is part of our everyday life." Emil's parents noticed that he wasn't very interested in toys, though he had many available. He was more interested in the chores they were doing, although according to his parents, he perceived them as a kind of play: "I think he's having fun helping us. He actually prefers working at our side to playing with his toys."

In line with the concept of educational work, Emil's parents ascribed greater importance to his participation and inclusion in the chores than to the work being done efficiently: "I prefer he mess around when we're supposed to clean the house to him not being involved." Emil took part in adult work on his own initiative, but his parents were encouraging and expressed a positive attitude towards his participation. Emil also watered flowers, and taught himself to count and use the computer. Parents noticed that he eagerly ate the food he picked in the garden as opposed to store-bought food. Although Emil participated in the work, his parents acknowledged that he was

too young to be assigned real work duties. He would usually start an activity on his own initiative and then stopped when he felt like it. If he wanted to, he was free to go and play. Maja and Simon were confident that children learn spontaneously by example, through observation and play. They also provided incentive; as Simon noted: “We encourage him a lot. If I am working on something, he joins me on his own, I don’t have to tell him anything, he wants to help and I just pick up from there and encourage him.” Maja emphasized that the knowledge the child acquires of their own volition is also the most valuable and durable. In this case study, active participation and learning through observation and play were linked in the perception of work as educational; the inclusion of a child in work and the acknowledgment of a child’s inner motivation were also employed as means of shaping a child’s character and framing work as a lifelong virtue in its own right.

Conclusion

In the case studies above, learning through observation, play, and active participation in work were all important aspects of the children’s experiences. The concept of educational work, i.e. cultural value attributed to children’s participation in work, was an important part of the rationale behind the children’s participation in work from an early age. Educational work can manifest itself in various ways, and if it is to play a role in socialization, the following conditions must be met: Firstly, if children are to participate in meaningful daily work, such work has to take place in the presence of children in the first place. Secondly, adults need to allow the child to take part in the work whereby they attribute positive value to their children’s participation. Here the notion of educational work is present: it is more important to parents that the child participate than that the work be done efficiently and in time. All parents however noted that there are certain situations and certain types of tasks they prefer to undertake alone, without the children present, either for safety reasons or because it is faster and more efficient. Indeed, children of this age require the parents’ attention, which often makes including them in work time-consuming; meanwhile, the parents’ time is typically already spread thin between balancing waged work and family life. The third condition that needs to be met in order for educational work to play a role in socialization is that adults enable the child to bring elements of work into play, for example allowing them to play with work tools. The children can either use tools in their play separately or while participating in work. Since physical closeness and shared time encouraged children to participate in work, I propose that the children’s willingness and inner motivation to participate in daily work is connected to the children’s need to be included in the network of social relationships and hitherto related social learning.

Thus, several aspects need to be taken into account in framing socialization as a two-way process (Ingold 2007): the inner motivation of children to participate and learn through social interactions, childrearing practices, the values of caregivers, and the political, social and economic circumstances that attribute specific meanings to work. Socialization practices involving learning through observation (Gaskins & Paradise 2010) and gradual participation in joint work activities (Lave & Wenger 1998; Rogoff 2014) are typically associated with subsistence domestic economy. Nonetheless, by pointing out different ways in which social learning through play and work takes place in rural Slovenia, this article has questioned the hegemonic representation of upbringing practices prevalent today.

The examples presented in this article disrupt the predominant Eurocentric ideals of protected childhoods, where work is seen as interfering with the children’s right to formal education and play. As I have shown, work can be just as important a childhood experience as play, and does

not necessarily exclude play and learning but can be complementary to them. Aside from cultural educational value attributed to work, I highlighted the intergenerational, historical, geographical and political trajectories, which explain why the educational value of work related to character development persists in Slovenia despite the post-socialist transitions to the global neoliberal market economy and the emergence of the entrepreneurial work ethics, which emphasizes savviness instead of diligence.

References

ABEBE T. 2009 « Child labour in the global South : a review and critical commentary », *Barn* 27(3-4) : 11-28.

BONFIGLIOLI C. 2017 « A working day that has no end : the double burden in socialist Yugoslavia », *Themenportal Europäische Geschichte* : https://www.europa.clio-online.de/essay/id/fdae-1705

BOLIN I. 2006 *Growing up in a culture of respect. Child rearing in Highland Peru*. Austin : University of Texas Press.

BOURDILLON M. 2012 « Reflections : values, rights and research » (332-348), *In* G. Spittler & M. Bourdillon (eds.) *African children at work : working and learning in growing up for life*. Berlin : Lit Verlag.

BOURDILLON M. & SPITTLER G. (eds.) 2012 *African children at work : working and learning in growing up for life*. Berlin : Lit Verlag.

BRÖCKLING U. 2016 *The entrepreneurial self : Fabricating a new type of subject.* London : Sage.

CHICK G. 2010 « Work, play, and learning » (119-143), *In* D. Lancy, J. Bock & S. Gaskins (eds.) *The anthropology of learning in childhood*. Lanham: Altamira Press.

CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD 1989 : https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx

ČERIN A. (ed.) 1983 *Pionirska organizacija v Sloveniji 1942-1982*. Ljubljana : Zveza prijateljev mladine Slovenije.

ERDEI I. 2004 « The happy child as an icon of socialist transformation : Yugoslavia's pioneer organization » (154-179), *In* J. Lampe & M. Mazower (eds.) *Ideologies and national identities : the case of twentieth-century Southeastern Europe*. Budapest : Central European University Press.

EVANS G. 2006 *Educational failure and working class white children in Britain*. New York : Palgrave Macmillan.

FEDERICI S. 2012 *Revolution at point zero : Housework, reproduction, and feminist struggle.* Oakland : PM Press.

FOUCAULT M. 1995 *Discipline & punish: The birth of the prison*. New York : Vintage Books.

GASKINS S. 2003 « From corn to cash : change and continuity within Mayan families », *Ethos* 31(2) : 248-273.

GASKINS S. 2008 « Children's daily lives among the Yucatan Maya » (280-288), *In* R.A LeVine & R.S. New (eds.) *Anthropology and child development : A cross-cultural reader*. Malden : Blackwell Publishing.

GASKINS S. & PARADISE R. 2010 « Learning through observation in daily life » (85-118), *In* D. Lancy, J. Bock & S. Gaskins (eds.) *The anthropology of learning in childhood*. Lanham : Altamira Press.

GRASSENI C. 2009 *Developing skill, developing vision : practices of locality at the foot of the Alps.* New York : Berghahn Book.

HARRIS O. 2007 « What makes people work ? » (137-165), *In* R. Astuti, J. Parry & C. Stafford (eds.) *Questions of anthropology*. Oxford, New York : Berg.

HORVAT L. & MAGAJNA L. 1989 *Razvojna psihologija*. Ljubljana : Državna založba Slovenije.

INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION (ILO) n.d. *What is child labour ?*, http://www.ilo.org/ipec/facts/lang--en/index.htm

INGOLD T. 2007 « The social child » (112-118), *In* A. Fogel, B.J. King & S.G. Shanker (eds.) *Human development in the twenty-first century. A dynamic systems approach to the life sciences*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

INVERNIZZI A. 2007 « Working children's experiences and children's rights » (289-308), *In* A. Allen, H. Bosly, M. De Bie, J. V. Lanotte, F. Ang, I. Delens-Ravier, M. Delplace, C. Herman, D. Reynaert, V. Staelens, R. Steel & M. Verheyde (eds.) *The UN children's rights convention : theory meets practice*. Antwerpen & Oxford : Intersentia.

JERAJ M. 2012 « Otroci socializma : skrb za otroke v Sloveniji po drugi svetovni vojni » (624-638), *In* A. Škoro Babić, M. Jeraj, M. Košir & B. Balkovec (eds.) *Zgodovina otroštva*. Ljubljana : Zveza zgodovinskih društev Slovenije.

JUHANT M. & LEVC S. 2013 *Varuh otrokovih dolžnosti : ali nehajte se ukvarjati z otrokovimi pravicami.* Mavčiče : Čmrlj.

KATZ C. 2012 « Work and play : economic restructuring and children's everyday learning in rural Sudan » (226-248), *In* G. Spittler & M. Bourdillon (eds.) *African children at work : working and learning in growing up for life*. Berlin : Lit Verlag.

KNEŽEVIČ HOČEVAR D. & ČERNIČ ISTENIČ M. 2010 *Dom in delo na kmetijah : raziskava odnosov med generacijami in spoloma*. Ljubljana : Založba ZRC SAZU.

KÖHLER I. 2012 « Learning and children's work in a pottery-making environment in northern Côte d'Ivoire » (113-141), *In* G. Spittler & M. Bourdillon (eds.) *African children at work : working and learning in growing up for life*. Berlin : Lit Verlag.

LANCY D. 2012 « The chore curriculum » (23-56), *In* G. Spittler & M. Bourdillon (eds.) *African children at work : working and learning in growing up for life*. Berlin : Lit Verlag.

LANCY D. 2016 « New studies of children's work, acquisition of critical skills, and contribution to the domestic economy », *Ethos* 44(3) : 202-222.

LANCY D. 2018 *Anthropological perspectives on children as helpers, workers, artisans, and laborers*. New York : Palgrave Macmillan.

LAREAU A. 2003 *Unequal childhoods : class, race and family life.* Berkeley and Los Angeles : University of California Press.

LAVE J. & WENGER E. 1998 *Situated learning : legitimate peripheral participation.* Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

LIEBEL M. & BUDDE R. 2017 « Other children, other youth : against eurocentrism in childhood and youth research » (119-136), *In* A. Invernizzi, M. Liebel, B. Milne & R. Budde (eds.) *Children out of place and human rights (Children's well-being : indicators and research, Volume 15)*. Cham : Springer.

LITTLE C. & LANCY D. 2016 « How do children become workers ? Making sense of conflicting accounts of cultural transmission in anthropology and psychology », *Ethos* 44(3) : 269-288.

MAKAROVIČ G. 1995 *Slovenci in čas : Odnos do časa kot okvir in sestavina vsakdanjega življenja*. Ljubljana : Krtina.

MARJANOVIČ UMEK L. 2001 « Psihologija predšolskega otroka » (27-54), *In* L. Marjanovič Umek (ed.) *Otrok v vrtcu : priročnik h kurikulu za vrtce.* Maribor : Založba Obzorja.

MAYALL B. 2007 *Children's lives outside school and their educational impact.* Cambridge : University of Cambridge.

MONTGOMERY H. 2010 « Learning gender roles » (287-308), *In* D. Lancy, J. Bock & S. Gaskins (eds.) *The anthropology of learning in childhood*. Lanham : Altamira Press.

NAROTZKY S. (ed.) 2020 *Grassroots economies : living with austerity in Southern Europe.* London : Pluto Press.

NIEWENHUYS O. 1994 *Children's lifeworlds : gender, welfare and labour in the developing world.* London : Routledge.

OCHS E. & IZQUIERDO C. 2009 « Responsibility in childhood : three developmental trajectories », *Ethos* 37(4) : 391-413.

ORTNER S. B. 2016 « Dark anthropology and its Others : Theory since the eighties », *Hau : Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6(1) : 47-73.

REYNOLDS P. *Dance civet cat : child labour in the Zambezi valley*. London : Zed Books.

ROGOFF B. 2014 « Learning by observing and pitching in to family and community endeavors : an orientation », *Human development* 57 : 69-81.

SITAR P. 2020 « Stiletto socialism : social class, dressing up, and women's self-positioning in socialist Slovenia », *Aspasia* 14(1) : 104-123.

SCHLEMMER B. (ed.) 2000 *The exploited child.* London & New York : Zed Books.

SKUBIC ERMENC K. 2015 « The role of comparative pedagogy in comparative educational research »

(37-56), *In* A.W. Wiseman & N. Popov (eds.) *Comparative sciences : interdisciplinary approaches (International perspectives on education and society, Volume 26)*. Bingley : Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Spittler G. 2010 « Beginnings of the anthropology of work : Nineteenth-century social scientists and their influence on ethnography » (37-53), *In* J. Kocka (ed.) *Work in a modern society : the German historical experience in comparative perspective*. New York : Berghahn Books.

Spittler G. 2012 « Children's work in a family economy : a case study and theoretical discussion » (57-85), *In* G. Spittler & M. Bourdillon (eds.) *African children at work : working and learning in growing up for life*. Berlin : Lit Verlag.

Studen A. 2012 « Človek mora delati za svojo srečo! Pretekla razpravljanja o delu s poudarkom na drugi polovici 18. in prvi polovici 19. Stoletja » (9-36), *In* A. Studen (ed.) *Pomisli na jutri : O zgodovini (samo) odgovornosti*. Ljubljana : Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino,

Stupanova M. 1932. *Kako vzgojim svojo deco : Za kmečke, meščanske in proletarske matere.* Maribor : Ljudska tiskarna.

Sutton-Smith B. 1997 *The ambiguity of play.* London : Harvard University Press.

Tomasello M. 2009 *Why we cooperate.* Cambridge : The MIT Press.

Turk Niskač B. 2018 « A tale of two kindergartens : visual representations of Slovenian children's daily lives in a rural and an urban setting » (147-160), *In* A. Mandrona & C. Mitchell (eds.) *Visual encounters and rural childhoods.* New Brunswick : Rutgers University Press.

Turk Niskač B. 2021a « From educational work to companionship : juxtaposing adults' and children's perspectives on work and play in early childhood », *Childhood : a global journal of child research* 28(1) : 42-55.

Turk Niskač B. 2021b « Of children's play, work and idleness embedded in sociality », *Entanglements : experiments in multimodal ethnography* 4(1) : 70-92.

UNICEF n.d. *Fact Sheet : a summary of the rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child*, https://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights_overview.pdf

Urbanc M. 2002 *Kulturne pokrajine v Sloveniji.* Ljubljana : Založba ZRC.

Vilfan S. 1961 *Pravna zgodovina Slovencev.* Ljubljana : Slovenska matica.

Vodopivec N. 2020 « Our factory : textile workers'memories and experiences in Slovenia », *Narodna umjetnost : hrvatski časopis za etnologiju i folkloristiku* 57(1) : 51-70.

Notes

1 In Slovenia, children aged 11 months to 6 years can attend a kindergarten, which is not mandatory. Public kindergartens follow the National Curriculum for Preschools from 1999, which focuses on play, creative activities and hands-on learning. Although the last year of kindergarten often includes practices in graphomotorics, children are not formally required to know how to write or read before they enter primary school at the age of six.

2 On the other hand, children at the age of four mostly distinguished between work and play activities, and took their contribution more seriously than adults did. When they participated in daily work, they thought of themselves as working, not playing. For a more detailed account on children's understanding of their participation in work see Turk Niskač 2021a.

3 Five grandparents (two male and three female), 23 parents (19 mothers and four fathers), and 26 children (12 girls and 14 boys) aged between six and fourteen years, from an urban and rural setting, participated in the postdoctoral study. The PhD study and postdoctoral project Z6-1881 were funded by the Slovene Research Agency.