RESPONSE TO SHAKING THE MOVERS VIII/IX:

Child Exploitation / Sexual Exploitation

The Role of Education in Addressing Child Exploitation

Presented By: Thomas Waldock, Ph.D
Child and Family Studies
School of Human and Social Development
Nipissing University (Muskoka Campus)
Shaking the Movers VIII (2015) and IX (2015) provides ‘movers’ with ample input into the issues of exploitation generally and sexual exploitation specifically, emanating from the voices of youth and providing us all this year with another example of how youth themselves are the experts in their own lives. My focus is the potential role of education in diminishing exploitation, and I will acknowledge that my decision to focus on this was predicated on the extent to which youth themselves – across both STM reports – emphasized the importance of education and knowledge about children’s rights for their own empowerment, in terms of building the kind of resilience necessary for confronting actual or potential instances of exploitation. This is true for all children and youth, but takes on particular importance for those who are already marginalized and in situations of vulnerability.

One of the things that I want to highlight in my comments also comes through loudly and clearly in the Reports: Education is not just related to children/youth, but also to adults working with and for children/youth, those who are in positions of responsibility to effect change, as parents, youth workers, counselors, caregivers, teachers and so on. Education also relates to adults in positions to effect institutional and structural change – legislators and policy makers, for example. Addressing exploitation requires that children/youth are empowered through knowledge of their rights, but it also requires knowledgeable adults supporting and advocating for children/youth and facilitating positive environments and respectful, empowering relationships. Article 42 of the UNCRC is really the overarching focus of these more comprehensive educational goals – that “States Parties undertake to make the principles and provisions of the Convention widely known, by appropriate and active means, to adults and children alike” (United Nation’s General Assembly, UNCRC, 1989).

Let’s first take heed of the comments from youth themselves around the need for education about their rights. Comments around the importance of education from STM VIII (2015) – often in the context of suggesting solutions to forms of exploitation – include: “Knowing your rights, so you know you have them” (p. 4); “Creating a global standard for education” (p. 14); and “Awareness is key, we need to teach kids about their rights” (p. 14). At times, comments are more specific in focusing on the need for knowledge of particular rights to address certain forms of exploitation, exemplified in the discussion of the right to privacy as this relates to media exploitation (p. 21). STM IX (2015) conveys the same message, – stated clearly in the keynote presentation by Children of the Street Society – that knowledge of rights empowers (p. 9). The message is fleshed out in even more detail through the ‘unpacking’ of Recommendation 3, that children’s rights need to be more ‘visible’ and ‘accessible’ to children/youth (p. 12).

Of course, the STM process itself, thanks to the efforts of Landon and all those involved, provides an example of youth participation and engagement around children’s rights and important issues, in this case exploitation. In this respect, it exemplifies a model of engagement borne of respect for youth and the building of positive relationships – achieving the kind of empowering effect that such approaches can have. I think Landon points this out very well in the Introduction to STM IX (2015), when she conveys her belief that “one of the great values of a rights-based approach to working with children and youth … is that it flattens the hierarchies of power and control that allow for exploitation and other abuses” (p. 4). The values underlying the approach are also well conveyed through the ‘Values Charter’ – outlined in STM IX (p. 8).
But the feedback obtained in both reports sometimes is sobering with respect to whether we have done a good job of raising awareness and carrying a like model forward into other societal contexts, as parents, educators, youth workers, caregivers, legislators, policy-makers, and so on, in the familial and institutional settings within which more comprehensive change might be realized. STM VIII/IX reflections include statements like the following: “For many, this was their first experience learning about and discussing children’s rights” (STM VIII, 2015, p. 24); and “Child’s rights seemed so unfamiliar to them. Youths expressed surprise for the rights and resources that exist, yet unaware (of) them (STM IX, 2015, p. 5). These reflections speak to the failure to fully implement Article 42 of the UNCRC, in other more comprehensive contexts – in areas of their lives where they should have already had such experiences and therefore awareness, prior to this STM opportunity and process. Clearly, most of the adults in their lives are letting them down to this point, and have a great deal of work to do. In saying this, I don’t mean to cast blame on any particular individuals – for example, the adults in their lives – because most of these adults lack awareness of the UNCRC as well. What I do mean to say is that the promise and obligation associated with Article 42 have not been fulfilled in relation to children/youth and adults alike.

Education broadly construed needs to play a powerful role in developing awareness in all areas of our lives, and for children/youth this would be instrumental in terms of building the kind of resilience necessary for confronting actual or potential instances of exploitation. Since it is incumbent on adults to facilitate the kind of positive, empowering interactions and outcomes that characterize the STM process, adults themselves need more of an awareness of children’s rights, and a kind of generational evolution in awareness needs to take place. And what environments or contexts would be important to address if our focus is education broadly conceived. With regard to the family, there needs to be an emphasis on parenting approaches and parenting education. Within schools, a children’s rights framework for education needs to be adopted, affecting the approaches and philosophies of teachers. Faculties of Education within universities need to incorporate children’s rights into teacher education. Community organizations working with children/youth need to have children’s rights-oriented mandates. Similarly, areas like children’s mental health and child welfare should be adopting a children’s rights framework.

All children/youth need allies and advocates who are educated about children’s rights, and environments/contexts that facilitate empowerment. For marginalized children/youth like those most susceptible to exploitation, – including many of those who identified as such while participating in the STM meetings – this is especially true. Research is clear on risk factors such as family issues and conflict, poverty, being an Aboriginal child/youth, and having child welfare involvement, to name a few. Certainly, preventative/proactive action to address these issues and factors is necessary. But one could make the case that education for both youth and adults about children’s rights, – about the normative standards intended to provide guidance in pursuing progressive changes and reforms in all of the areas previously mentioned – is at the core of what is a very daunting project indeed.

To suggest that any of us are ‘movers’ in relation to this project may seem overly optimistic. But there is a lot to be said for slow, plodding progress. I suppose each of us has to decide what role we might play, however small, in our own tiny corners of experience, particularly as educators. In this regard, I’m sure that we all can speak of small victories, and we should always remember that many small victories could add up over time. And collectively as members of CRAN or in other
educational contexts, we need to be engaged as we strive for more comprehensive change. Suffice to say that I think education broadly conceived is an important focus of advocacy and activism, especially since STM youth emphasized it to such a degree.

If we are feeling discouraged by the daunting nature of this project, it bears remembering that we are in the midst of what one historian has called a world historical transformation in our views of children and childhood (Strong-Boag, 2002), and that in not much more than century, we have gone from children being viewed as property to discussions about the rights of children. Looked at from this perspective, the progress has been remarkable, and there is every reason to keep working.

References


