Elementary School Pupils as Messengers and Workers (1878–1890)

Abstract

Social reformers understood how adversely child labor affected children's health and school performance; but they also had to consider the economic pressures facing poor families. The following observations by a Hamburg elementary school teacher (1888–1890) and a clerical school inspector in the city of Greiz (1878) illuminate this dilemma: Some schoolboys allegedly worked up to 200 hours per month in addition to the time they spent in the classroom. On the other hand, one family was driven into desperate circumstances because regulations forbade their eleven-year-old son (who had not yet learned to read properly) from taking employment.

Source

I. Observations of a Hamburg Teacher (1888–1890)

If a healthy, strong twelve- to thirteen-year-old boy seeks to earn a few pennies on his afternoons off from school by providing messenger services for a businessman or doing other kinds of light work and in this way helps alleviate some of his parents' worries about the family's daily bread, then this can be endorsed without a doubt. Such activity can harm neither him nor the school, because there is enough time left over for relaxation, play, and quiet intellectual work. Indeed, it may even be beneficial to him insofar as these tasks, which entail a certain degree of responsibility, become a kind of classroom for his later life.

If, however, this employment occupies the boy before 7:00 a.m. or after 9:00 p.m., or even demands both the morning *and* the evening, so that each month he puts in over 100—and even up to 200—hours of work outside of school; if the nature of his work is such that it requires the full physical strength of an adult; if it not only cuts into the sleep that is so essential to the boy in this most intense phase of his development, but also deprives him of rest on Sunday—then I think we have long since passed the point at which the boys' bodies and minds and school education can continue without being adversely affected.

I have devoted my attention to these working pupils by taking notes on their number, their age and type of employment, their daily work schedule, the additional hours of work they perform on their afternoons off from school and on Sundays, their hourly wages, and their employers. From these notes, the following items are worth mentioning:

The percentage of employed pupils who work before 7:00 a.m. and after 9:00 p.m. was as follows for the second class:

After Easter, 1888, about 12%;
After Easter, 1889, about 25%;
After Easter, 1890, about 27%.

For the current year, the number suddenly rose to approximately 37% during the strikes (in May and June) but has now sunk back to about 30%.

Their jobs consist of lining up bowling pins, washing glasses, and delivering newspapers, milk, bread,

and other goods.

Their ages range from 12 to 13½ years.

According to my table, for some a day's work begins as early as 4 a.m. Most of the boys have to get up between about 5 or 6 a.m. Those working only at night are the ones who get off work the latest. Among them, for example, are the pin boys, almost all of whom have to work every day from 6 p.m. to midnight. The most overexerted boys are the messengers and newspaper boys, whose daily work begins at 4 a.m. and ends at 10 p.m.

Afternoons without classes and Sundays mean increased working hours for most employed students. Throughout the year, some of the pin boys have to show up for work on Sundays at 12 p.m. and usually perform hard work until midnight. Most messenger boys have a particularly tough time around Christmas; often it is almost midnight before they are allowed to go home.

The number of monthly working hours varies between 60 and 200. More than half of the boys work 100 hours and more. Unfortunately, with respect to this category and the following ones, my statistics are not complete for 1888 and 1889.

The pay that pupils receive for their labor varies widely; the lowest is three pfennigs (milk boy), the highest is about twenty pfennigs (pin boy). In no single instance was the earned money deposited as savings for the boy; it was always used to support the family.

Source: Speech by C. H. Dannmeyer, delivered to the Hamburg Teachers' Association on September 27, 1890, published in *Pädagogische Reform*, Hamburg, vol. 14, no. 42 (October 22, 1890); reprinted in Klaus Saul, Jens Flemming, Dirk Stegmann, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Arbeiterfamilien im Kaiserreich. Materialien zur Sozialgeschichte in Deutschland 1871–1914*. Düsseldorf: Droste, 1982, pp. 223–24.

Translation: Erwin Fink

II. Petition Filed by a Local Pastor and School Inspector in Greiz (1878)

Petition by the pastor in Reinsdorf for leniency for a poor local schoolboy regarding the incomplete fulfillment of § 2 of the Royal Decree of May 24, 1855, on using school-aged children for work, etc.

The Hammermühle (a wool mill), located on Saxon territory within the parish, was set up by the previous owner as a so-called spinning mill; he likes to employ school children from this side of the river there as well.

As soon as I learned about this from our teacher, I got in touch with the owner and had to demand the dismissal of one of the employed boys, Franz Paul from Schönfeld, because he did not meet the requirements specified in § 2 of the above decree. Even though the boy has attended school for three years and has already turned nine, he has not, whether by his own wrongdoing or not, learned to read properly, as § 2 stipulates.

The boy's parents, poor weavers who live from hand to mouth, are blessed with six children; the eldest is an eleven-year-old boy. Despite low prices, they need six marks worth of bread per week, and they sorely need the two marks per week that the boy brings home as weekly pay from the mill. The father is not able to earn more than nine marks a week on average at the mechanized weaving mill and the mother, tied to the home for the sake of the small children, can earn little or nothing at all.

In order to lend a helping hand to this hard-pressed family in their predicament and to loosen their ties to Social Democracy—I would like to propose a solution to the high authorities concerning this affair, one with which I have already achieved a number of welcome successes. Namely, I would give the boy several

private lessons per week in reading, writing, and math until St. Michael's Day, at which time he would then, with God's help, be able to fulfill the requirements of § 2.

Would you therefore, in gracious consideration, permit as a last resort that I issue the boy's school report in advance for the purpose of his speedy resumption of work at the spinning mill, on the express condition that he continue regular attendance of school?

Source: Rudolf Schramm, "Kinderarbeit—ein dunkles Kapitel aus der Geschichte der Greizer Textilindustrie," in *Jahrbuch des Kreismuseums Hohenleuben-Reichenfels*, no. 5, 1956, pp. 103–4; reprinted in Klaus Saul, Jens Flemming, Dirk Stegmann, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Arbeiterfamilien im Kaiserreich. Materialien zur Sozialgeschichte in Deutschland 1871–1914*. Düsseldorf: Droste, 1982, pp. 224–25.

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