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# The Occupational Benefits of Children Farming

Ellie Edrissi

This paper analyses the positive outcomes of youth responsibilities, routines, autonomy, youth programs and scholarships, cultural identity, educational and life experiences through the occupation of farming during seasonal and/or after school hours. The multidimensional context of children willingly working in the agricultural industry allows positive psychological, economical, and cultural experiences while building a stronger family unity. The occupation of farming allows youth participation with the environment, social skills, inter-generational transfer of skills, and increased confidence for future aspirations as they mature to adulthood.

Keywords: child labor, youth early employment, child labor laws, youth programs, psychological aspects of youth employment, agricultural organizations

## Introduction

There are negative reactions towards children working in the agricultural industry due to undocumented migrant workers, hazardous use of chemicals and pesticides, unpaid employment, environment that affects children's health, and other negative perspectives associated with child labor. However, not enough focus has been placed on the positive aspect of child agricultural labor, such as positive participation of children contributing to the family traditions, inter-generational transfer of skills, household livelihood and welfare, social skills, increased confidence and self-esteem, entrepreneurship and independence. Children and family households are very important during the farming season for the agricultural industry as well as the family income and survival (Garrett & Schulman, 1989).

There is a distinct difference between non-harmful child labor as opposed to harmful child labor environment. Non-harmful child labor is defined as work-related responsibilities that are part-time, does not affect or preclude academic career or attendance, provides income to the child, allows for a sense of self and accomplishment, sense of community, and allows for social skills that will continue to evolve and benefit the child (Canadian International Development Agency [CIDA], 2006; Living History Farm Organization [LHFO], 2014).

Seventy-five percent of indigenous populations reside in rural areas and value the occupation of agriculture for survival of their families and communities.

Historically and globally, children have been major focal contributors to agricultural productivity (CIDA, 2006). The agricultural industry recruits 59% of child labor, which means 98 million children under the age of 18 contribute to the productivity (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2014; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2014). In the United States, an estimated 500,000 youth farmers are employed in the agriculture industry (National Farm Work Industry [NFWM], 2014). Farm labor is not limited to male adults, but includes children of both genders. Children as young as 12 years of age are permitted to contribute to the agricultural industry for a total of 3 hours per day on school days (NFWM, 2014). Work by children in agricultural fields provides children with opportunities to gain life skills, positive youth engagement with environment to develop cultural identity, and educational experience.

## Methodology

An aggregate of literature review on child labor, youth early employment, child labor laws, youth programs, psychological aspects of youth employment, agricultural organizations, analysis of video interviews were analyzed for this scholarly reflection paper. This developmental research assesses and analyzes the occupational benefits of farm work by children in the form of the social and economical development of youth transitioning to adulthood through the occupation of farming and gaining life skills and aspirations.

## Literature Review

### *Legal Child Labor and Laws*

Legal child labor and laws contribute to protecting children in the agricultural industry throughout history until the current time. The minimum age standard for agricultural employment includes the following ages: 16, 14, 12, and children under the age of 12 (FAO, 2014; ILO, 2014). The law protects children based on age category for labor responsibilities and operating machinery before and after school hours. Children between the ages of 12 and 15 have lighter agricultural responsibilities outside of school hours (ILO, 2014).

The agriculture industry and rural-development initiatives have implemented laws recognizing children's rights, recognizing equal gender rights and economic value, while taking into consideration the children's rights and safety and health issues through good practices to prevent exploitation or abuse (CIDA, 2006).

#### School Hours and Agricultural Work

Every state implements different laws regarding minimum age of employment for child labor during school hours. The majority of the states within the United States with the exception of Illinois, Massachusetts, Nevada, and South Dakota allow individuals 16 or older to work in the agriculture industry and farming during school hours. Most states approve 14 year olds to be employed, and children under the age of 12 must have written parental consent and are exempt from the federal minimum wage (Department of Labor [DOL], 2014; NFWM, 2014).

### *Explaining Overtime and Minimum Wage*

Any employer in agriculture who did not utilize more than 500 "man days" of agricultural labor in any calendar quarter of the preceding calendar year is exempt from the minimum wage and overtime pay provisions of the FLSA for the current calendar year. A man day is defined as any day during which an employee performs agricultural work for at least one hour. (United States Department of Labor, 2008, para. 6)

The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) states all employees are entitled for overpay if the individual works beyond 40 hours per week. The employee has the right to one and half regular rate of pay. According to the FLSA, youth employment in agriculture is no less than \$4.25 per hour under the age of 20 years old (DOL, 2008).

### *4-H Federal Extension Service Training Program*

In the 1950s, the Agricultural Extension Services was designed for educating and training the adult population; however, programs expanded and were specifically designed for rural youth population, such as the 4-H program and the Future Farmers of America (FFA; Living History Farm Organization [LHFO], 2014). These are youth organization programs which are sponsored by local schools throughout the United States. In 1988, FFA changed its name to National Future Farmers of America (NFFA) and operates on a local, state, and national level with the aim of striving to prepare future generations for the art, science, and business of agricultural industry (FFA, 2014). Currently there are over half a million FFA members between the ages of 12 and 21 within the United States, including Puerto Rico, who have awarded 1,700 individuals with scholarships. Scholarships have been awarded to youth totaling 2.2 million dollars in 2014 alone. The 4-H is an after school program that is sponsored by the Extension Service and administered by National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), which promotes and offers vocational agriculture, such as operational training program for 14- and 15-year-old teenagers to apply and complete a certification that allows legal operation of tractors, machines, and equipment after school hours (USDA, 2014; Farm Service Agency [FSA], 2014; LHFO, 2014). Terry Schrick, a retired agricultural educator, discussed the positive aspects of teaching children who work in the fields. He discussed how some of the children became very successful and pursued the medical profession, veterinarianian field, while some went back to farming as a profession (LHFO, 2014).

Children in agriculture versus non-agricultural work do not preclude school attendance or enrollment (Walters & Briggs, 1993). In fact, child labor outside of the agriculture industry has a higher incidence of decreased school attendance compared to children working in the agricultural industry (Walters & Briggs, 1993). Furthermore, the literacy rate among children employed in the agricultural industry was higher than children who worked in the non-agricultural areas (Walters & Briggs, 1993).

### *Mental and Psychological Context*

According to Maciuba, Westneat, and Reed (2013), "findings show that the farmers have positive perspectives on work and farm future, and strong attachment to the land" (p. 336). Farmers expressed personal sat-

isfaction, career satisfaction, a sense of self-identity and self-worth, attachment to farming culture and land, and a sense of family pride to pass skills to next generation. The United States (U.S.) Representative Blaine Luetkemeyer expressed a similar viewpoint regarding his childhood experience in the occupation of working on farmland during adolescent years. During an interview, Representative Luetkemeyer vocalized his concerns of wanting to challenge the U.S. Department of Labor on the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) and explore options of children working in the agricultural industry; those, which he stated, aided him in gaining experience and values, contributing to family, paying for college tuition, and allowing him spending money (N.A., 2011).

## Discussion

### *Gaining Life Experience*

Paid farm occupations for children allow the youth to develop strong work ethics, discipline, structure, organization, routines, and a sense of responsibility at an early age. Promotion of healthy adolescent development by incorporating daily routines and responsibilities in day-to-day activities is important and possible through the occupation of farming. The daily responsibilities of farming require the practice of daily routines and better understanding of time organization, which provides youths with structure, purpose, and organizational skills. Certain routines practiced on the farm may become part of a group, a culture or a group culture, which eventually develops special meaning and becomes a ritual. Certain routines and rituals learned on the farm field provide opportunities to organize the family and foster meaning for the family unit for youths who work in tandem with parents and siblings. The occupation of youth farming allows social routines to develop and enhances social skills throughout adolescent years. Working on farms provides opportunities for children to thrive in life, integrate within the community, and develop career avenues by experiencing occupations outside of the academic and real-life settings to gain life skills beneficial for the future. According to Barclay, Benelli, and Wolf, routine can influence development (Gemici, Bednarz, Karmel, & Lim, 2014). The farming culture is a community and social support system that shapes, promotes, and influences the youth population to increase self-esteem, sense of belonging, and sense of social connectedness, which flourishes to provide a positive occupational experience. The sense of connection and interdependence to the community,

resources, and environment positively influenced the youths' ability to strive and succeed in future occupational endeavors and to accomplish goals (Whiteford & Hocking, 2012). Family values and support influence youths' choice of occupations, which motivate youths to have goals for future aspirations as they transition to adulthood (Gemici et. al., 2014).

Junior Farmer Field and Life School program used agriculture to teach youths who are "vulnerable," including orphans with AIDS to learn and develop life skills in a pilot program in Mozambique (MediaVoice for Children, 2011). FAO (2014), ILO (2014), and the World Food Program jointly assisted a pilot program to help these children become independent and self-sufficient by learning to harvest their own food. Incorporating the occupation of farming for youth allows for the survival skills for day-to-day living, giving back to the community, learning the nutritional value of food, and increasing their quality of life for themselves and the community without parental presence (Media Voices for Children, 2011). The occupation of children farming increased confidence and taught cultural heritage through dances that integrated the agriculture and respect for nature.

### *Educational Experience*

**Monetary independence.** The Junior Farm Field and Life School Program also incorporated economic perspective of agriculture industry to empower the youth. At a young age, monetary independence gained by the youth taught children to save for future academic careers or investment back into the agricultural industry. Working on the farms and earning money empowers the individual at a young age to strive to invest for the future.

**School enrollment.** Children in agricultural labor do not preclude school attendance, and Walters and Briggs (1993) indicated the literacy of children employed in the agricultural industry is higher than children employed in non-agricultural industry. As a result, youth programs encourage participation of their programs and encourage applying for scholarships to continue in the agricultural industry.

**Youth early employment and behavior.** According to Yeung and Rauscher (2014), children who work at a young age may have fewer behavioral problems due to having a better sense of self-control and independence. Lower socioeconomic families whose children are employed at an early age behave better due

to the economic incentives for caring for other family members and contributing to the family income (Yeung & Rauscher, 2014).

**Youth programs.** According to Gemici et al. (2014), several external factors, such as something influence youths at the age of 15 to make unrealistic aspirations that cannot be followed through by the time they reached 30 years of age the individuals aspirations; however, programs like the 4-H federal extension training program offer a realistic approach to making realistic aspirations and building on them as they mature and age through experience. The positive outcomes of the 4-H Federal Extension Service Training Program for the child provides a sense of independence to complete a task independently. Youth programs, such as the 4-H, provides a sense of responsibility and contribution to family resources, finances, researching further resources available to the youth to plan future career plans. The 4-H program helps build the child's self-esteem and confidence to permit initiation of an independent occupation, to be integrated into the community, and strive for achievement and complete milestones at an early age.

**Loans to child farmers.** Youth farmers and ranchers, sponsored by the USDA FSA, grants loans to children who reside in rural areas who contribute to "income-producing projects" that are associated with 4-H clubs and Future Farmers of America (Nolz, 2009). These loans are obtained by children who are part of an organized program that supervises and provides organizational advisers. They allow for an organized plan to produce enough income to repay the loans for the child to gain business experience, and entrepreneurship at an early age.

**Scholarships.** "Last year, \$75,000 was made available to students through the UnitedAg & United Agricultural Benefit Trust Scholarship Program" (Showalter, 2014, para. 4). There are many scholarship opportunities for children of family farm owners or children who wish to continue with the agricultural industry as a career. Sullivan Supply's Youth Scholarship offers up to \$20,000.00 for high school seniors or college students under the age of 21 who want to pursue a path to the agricultural industry (Showalter, 2014). There are scholarships available from the National Milk Producers Foundation for graduate students who wish to study dairy-related majors (Showalter, 2014).

### **Sense of Cultural Identity**

People who work on farmland become attached to the land and develop a sense of self-worth and pride for the farming culture (Maciuba, 2013). Parents have a sense of family pride to transfer an inter-generational skill to the youth by teaching their children safety precautions on how to drive a tractor, plowing skills, investment skills, comprehending the economic value and perspective, and gains and losses of business investments. There are benefits of children connecting with their rural roots through the occupation of farming. Children in the urban communities learn through the various youth programs at rural community farming skills such as survival and economic gains and investments.

"Working and living in agricultural communities can contribute to a child's sense of community and ethnic identity" (CIDA, 2006, p. 3). According to Media Voices for Children (2011), "cultural basis is integrated into agriculture" and allows for children and youth to understand their roots and cultural heritage. Agricultural habits, routines, and occupations help children discover their cultural roots and heritage.

**Co-occupations.** Children who work on the farms, seasonally or after school hours have a better understanding of the family occupations, traditions, learning of care for other living beings, caregiving, and co-occupations. Children learn the responsibilities to care for others and be nurturing to others on the job. Children who work on farms learn from adults, parents, or siblings co-occupation by working to collect eggs, feeding the chickens, and caring for other animals on the farm (Garrett & Schulman, 1989).

### **Conclusion**

Implications of the occupation of child farming is spreading the awareness of farming at a young age and promoting the scholarship incentives to students at school for children to have options and choices for future career experience. The occupation of farming and agriculture for minors allows for a head start on life skills, socialization, business experience, monetary independence, and stronger family unit and engagement. Family values and collaboration occur as a result of children farming alongside their parents and siblings and become culturally integrated with the community, incorporate social routines and roles. The occupation of children working on farms provides an opportunity for children to thrive in life, develop career paths by experiencing occupations in real-life setting to gain life skills beneficial for future aspirations and investments.

The farming culture allows for a strong social support system to influence the youth population to increase sense of belonging, sense of social connectedness, and supports youths' choice of occupations, which motivates youths to have goals for future aspirations as they transition to adulthood.

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