HIV/AIDS AND VULNERABILITY, EDUCATION AND PARTICIPATION:

ISSUES OF RIGHTS, RESPONSES AND CHILDREN IN OR OUT OF SCHOOL – A GROWING DIVIDE IN CHINA

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Introduction

The rapid changes in China over the past two decades, particularly the spectacular economic growth with its visible impact in city skylines, urban road layout and the massive increase in car use, are becoming well-known around the world (1). There have been changes also in the range of childhoods in China, with most children experiencing pressures to study and achieve high scores to progress further at school, while at the same time increasing numbers of children are becoming vulnerable to emerging forms of exploitation, abuse and harm. The emerging and increasing forms of vulnerability for children have exposed gaps in the existing welfare system, particularly around child protection. The developing plethora of responses, in addition to work by government departments, include attention from emerging local charities and from international non-government organisations that are based on the adoption of different values and approaches.

Work with HIV/AIDS affected children on developing an approach to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in central China illustrates a range of issues around childhood, vulnerability, responses and particularly rights based approaches to children, protection and development and children's participation. A project involving children's research highlighted not only the importance of education but the growing and significant divide between children in and out of school in China. The interconnections between what are often seen as different strands of work by many children's organisations, that is on welfare and protection, and on education of children, also come to the fore, suggesting problems for rights-based organisations in any dichotomy of work with `settled' children in the mainstream and work with marginalised children. Children in villages experiencing a severe HIV/AIDS epidemic provide a context and example, in being transformed from poorer children but who were largely attending school, to vulnerable children out of or at risk of dropping out of school, and themselves raising a range of additional concerns about their future.

Economic change and division

Evidence of rapid change in China is now incontrovertible, but the economic success and comparative prosperity gained in the past twenty years does not apply to all. Significant inequality has already become a major structural divide. On the one hand China has overtaken the United States as a

consumer in four of `the five basic food, energy and industrial commodities' - grain, meat, coal, steel, the fifth being oil (Brown 2005). At the same time the government and the 2005 National People's Congress have raised concerns about the standard of living, especially in the countryside, and reports in 2004 suggested that parts of China are becoming poorer: in 2003 there was an increase of 800,000 people living in absolute poverty over figures for 2002 (2).

Change since 1979-80 began with economic ideology, policy and practice, and had consequent and associated social transformations. Increasing globalisation has also had an impact, with the government paying attention to the development of business infrastructure and urban areas in particular. There has been some popular debate on whether this is positive or negative. In addition, China has been accepted into the World Trade Organisation, which will bring further change, with more unemployment predicted (Mathiason 2002). The effects of economic growth, market liberalisation and the development of private enterprises are best seen in the cities. Massive rebuilding is accompanied by the profound cultural impact of new forms of communication. New programming on television, the internet, and especially the dramatic spread of mobile phones in cities go alongside the rise of lifestyle magazines that highlight a new consumerism. The emergence of the new middle classes is indicated by this material life, and new aspirations and possibilities, for example for cars and travel. The other side of modern life in the city has come partly through the reduction of state-owned enterprises and consequent increases in the numbers of laid-off workers and now, especially, rising unemployment. The divide within the city is marked not only by a visible prosperity in some areas, but also a visible impoverishment of others.

Urban inequality and unemployment is exacerbated by the flow of migrant workers from the countryside, providing a pool of labour that is reconstructing the city (see West 2004a for discussion of material change in the city). An early element of economic reform was changes in rural agricultural household responsibility system that enabled farmers to sell excess produce and brought them some initial prosperity. But increasingly farm work has been abandoned by men (and some women) for the benefits of cash incomes in the city. In addition, major projects such as the development of the three gorges dam, and urbanisation such as in Chongqing have meant many people have lost the land they relied upon to make a living. These ex-farmers have low transferable skill levels and have become a new group of poor. When their land was taken, they were allocated factory jobs rather than other compensation. Because they lacked skills, these posts were manual work, and in the reform of state-owned enterprises, these workers were laid off (3).

Rural and urban areas are linked by increased migration rates stimulated by inequality and perceptions of new opportunity and expectations. Such migration is supposed to be constrained by residence regulations which in the past restricted most rural and urban citizens to their places of birth, and maintained a strict separation between the city and countryside. These restrictions have effectively been lifted (or ignored) as rural areas come to rely more on remittances sent home, and urban areas depend on a supply of cheap labour. Now the old rural- urban division has become reinforced as a major structural divide in China through income and wealth inequality and material life. Inequality also crudely corresponds to an east-west divide between the more prosperous eastern coastal seaboard and the poorer, larger western regions running through to the boundaries of central, south and south east Asia. Generalisations are difficult in such a large country with 56 official ethnic groups (nationalities), the populations of some of which number in the millions. However, these divides based on the rural-urban split and rising economic inequality widely hold sway.

Changes in childhood

Changes in childhood have also been structured by social policy and economic impact, particularly in the central and eastern areas. Rural and urban environments offer different opportunities, especially when overlaid by cultural, ethnic and other social categories. Inequality has raised a threat of being left out, falling behind, or losing out, in the new consumerism, the emerging types of status and levels of material goods, particularly for the urban middle classes.

The instigation of economic reform was paralleled by the initiation of the one-child policy from 1979. Since 1979-80 the policy has had its greatest impact amongst Han (4) families in cities (where it has been most strictly adhered to), and where the one-child bears the hopes and burdens of the family into the future (perhaps now, two parents and four grandparents). In urban areas, concern about the potential loneliness of one child in a family, and the child's expected burden of caring for parents, has been discussed for many years. Children have been seen as 'Little Emperors', that is, perceived to be 'protected' from much of the experiences of daily life, and fed and pampered whilst doing their work and duty of learning (see, for example, Jing 2000). There are now changes to the policy coming in urban areas (where newly married couples who were both single children are able to have more than one child themselves), the costs of childhood are said to be prohibitive by many (5). But this apparent loosening of restrictions in urban areas is limited and forced abortion is not unknown (pers.comm.).

Already, by the 1990s children's and young people's material experiences had altered significantly to those of their parents, particularly in urban areas. Now, children's lives include an increased variety and quality of electrical equipment in the home, new apartments and a vastly different array of foodstuffs, increasing annually. Soon after the start of the 21st century, apart from widespread mobile phones, the number and variety of books in shops had increased considerably along with more fashion shops, and home computers. Other domestic patterns changed for some families, with more and more eating out, and increasing numbers employing *ayis*, or daily childcare/ maids.

Another significant change has been the increased importance attached to education, or schooling. The basic issues are outlined here and discussed further below. Even adults now aged in their late 20s have remarked on the difference in their experience of school and that of children now. In both rural and urban areas, but especially in cities, educational pressures now are immense, to achieve good scores and go to university, and where affordable to become cultivated (learning musical instruments). This means that children, especially as they near ages for attending middle school, high school and university, spend most of their time in study. Apart from school, they have additional classes in the evenings and weekends, and during the school holidays. The extent of such classes depends on parent's ability to pay, but because of the competition for places and scores, parents will pay what they can. Additional classes may include learning extra-curricula cultural or status achievements such as music, or especially proficiency in foreign languages. Children are aware of the competition, of parent's spending and so generally devote themselves to study. The pressures have caused mental health problems and suicides (Cui 2000, Xu 2000). The government has initiated a policy of `quality education' to emphasise children's emotional and other development rather than the score. Also, the government has issued statements against teachers setting excessive homework. But the attitude of most parents and children is that if others are doing extra work, then so must I/my child, if they are to compete.

If children in cities (and in rural areas) are not doing well at school, especially if it seems clear that they are not going to do well enough to go to university (or even high school) then there is a likelihood they will leave school. This risk of dropping out of school early is partly because an education geared towards scores for university has little attraction or meaning for them. The pressure on getting high

scores in a few subjects means that teachers in some schools stop other topics (for example, music, sport) in order to concentrate on core score areas. In addition, some children seen as not likely to get good scores, including disabled children (see below) or who are reckoned as a 'bad influence' on others are likely to be excluded, especially if children are coming into conflict with the law, or have parents in conflict with the law. In cities internet cafes are said to be attractions for children that increase the risks of dropping out, but these might be otherwise seen as means of coping with boredom of school classes.

Internet cafes and other urban attractions have been suggested also to draw children and young people from rural areas into leaving home. However, in poorer rural areas, dropping out of school is particularly associated with poverty. Many villages have established and developing traditions of migration include children from 16 years and below, although this is not officially recognised nor sanctioned. Even in areas of dire poverty the means of improvement is believed to lie in education, but poor families are disadvantaged partly because of the costs of attending school. Although tuition is supposed to be free, there are many additional expenses charged to students, and the costs are prohibitive for many poorer families, especially those with more than one child.

In the countryside families generally have more than one child: this was always permitted among the 'minority' nationalities, many of whom are located in the countryside and in border provinces. But having more than one child has been the practice and permitted in many rural areas among Han peoples for some years. Many rural families even have more than two children, evident from villages visited where there are two girls and a boy, all in their teens. Preference for male children has continued especially in rural areas, and brought disadvantages to some girls in terms of nutrition and access to school (Li and Zhu 1999). (6) But abandonment of girl babies and disabled boy and girl babies continues, and children's welfare homes in China generally have only very few if any non-disabled young male residents. Furthermore, the one child policy is known to have been recently strongly enforced in an urban area (pers.comm.).

Vulnerabilites

Economic and social change and inequality has brought new vulnerabilities especially for children, which are characterised by migration and the appearance of HIV/AIDS. Migrants are likely to face stigma and discrimination, and be blamed for social problems in cities. In rural areas migration of adults also affects the lives of their children. In some families the adult men leave, so children are brought up by their mothers in villages that are without many young to middle aged adult males for most of the year. In other families both parents migrate and children are left behind to be raised by relatives or grandparents. Recent research found that of 619 migrant parent (couples) in Beijing, 65 percent left their children behind (pers.comm.). Older children migrate themselves (and some children migrate with their parent(s) at an early age). The continuation of dire poverty in some areas leads parents to send off their children with adults to earn money: this will take children out of school and often into exploitative labour in cities (including flower selling, begging, garbage sorting, and worse).

In rural areas migration has changed the dynamics in village households and communities where the only males left behind are mostly very old or very young. But migration must also be seen in broad perspective, because of the variety of forms of movement that are taking place. Inequality, rural poverty and the promise of better opportunities elsewhere has not only led to unsafe migration with exploitation in cities, but also the rapid development of trafficking, both internally and across international borders. Trafficking mostly includes children and young people, especially young women, for crime as well as labour and sex. Trafficking, domestic violence and abuse, and new opportunities to move have also brought an increase in street children and beggars in cities. Street children report that

they are running away from domestic violence and abuse, and problems of family break up, divorce, and reconstituted families - processes which may be exacerbated by family tensions because of inequality and striving to get on amidst changes that are bringing new uncertainties as well as opportunities (7). Recent research on girls left behind by migrant parents finds them to be at higher risk of sexual abuse (pers. comm., ongoing research).

The HIV/AIDS epidemic presents a new threat, and which may now spread even more rapidly because of changes in sexual mores. Migration is also seen as symbolic of the HIV/AIDS spread. For example, although the severe HIV/AIDS epidemic in central China derives from bad practices in buying blood, the usual explanation is that the initial infection there stemmed from a migrant, someone who must have been already infected, and passed on the infection when selling blood. This migrant is explained as either a local who was working elsewhere and became infected (perhaps through sex) or a migrant from elsewhere who was passing through or working near the area at the time of the blood selling. People infected and affected by HIV/AIDS experience prejudice and discrimination, as do migrants.

Economic reform changed a number of existing institutions, and this included the welfare system: everything was previously provided by the state through the work unit. The new social issues (such as the appearance of street children, trafficking, children coming into conflict with the law, migration), require new welfare and protection responses. New services are needed, and new methods of financing them. Apart from new taxation, government has encouraged the development of local welfare responses and is gradually backing the emergence of civil society as a means of provision.

Children's protection and welfares services are needed. There is some child protection legislation, and China ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991, but there are no developed implementation mechanisms (except rarely in certain legal services). Furthermore, there is a tendency to look at adults in the two important strands of vulnerability in migration and HIV/ AIDS, although children are also affected by them both in various ways. Problems of migration linked to children have slowly received increasing attention from the late 1990s, especially linked to issues of trafficking. The lives of children affected by HIV/AIDS have only recently come to public attention, especially from the epidemic in central China where there are now large numbers of orphans. The problems faced by children affected by HIV/AIDS, with additional health, physical and emotional difficulties, are as great or greater than the stigma and discrimination experienced by migrants and their children. The experiences of children affected by HIV/AIDS offer one exemplar site where competing and changing constructions of childhood collide, linked to developing expressions of inequality.

HIV/AIDS

The initial cases of HIV/AIDS in China were associated with intravenous drug use in the south west, on the borders with Myanmar, and subsequently in Xinjiang, on the borders with Kazakhstan (a border that also touches on Afghanistan). But, the severest current epidemic is in central China, and derives from blood buying practices. In the early-mid 1990s, for a brief period, poor villagers from sites in provinces such as Henan and Anhui sold their blood for prices ranging from 100 to less than 50 *renminbi* (around 12 to six US dollars at current rates). These were then substantial sums of money for people living in poor rural areas. People were encouraged to sell blood and needed cash especially because some rural livelihoods were mostly non-cash income earning. HIV infection occurred because the blood was taken, mixed with other peoples through the use of unsterilised equipment and containers, materials for blood products extracted, and the remainder returned to the sellers. HIV spread through these processes and subsequently through unprotected sex with spouses. As a result large numbers of adults, concentrated in a few province prefectures, have become sick and are dying.

There has been much stigma and discrimination, because HIV/AIDS was publicised as transmitted through sex and through drug use, and so it was supposed that the victims had `been immoral'. In central China many women went to sell their blood and became infected, passing infection onto their spouses. This meant that the epidemic has especially affected mothers, but probably also led to exacerbated stigma on gender grounds. Also, when they became ill, villagers did not realise what their illness was, and much money was spent on seeking a cure, with the result that already poor families have big debts and become poorer.

There are now increasing numbers of orphans, who may be living with relatives who might also be sick, or who are elderly. There are issues to do with costs of attending school, of support, and dealing with grief and emotional life. The problem has begun to gain public attention, but the general assumption in many places has been to place children in large orphanages, and institutions have been created for this purpose as part of the development of local initiatives and responses to welfare needs, especially in new local charities. The more recent policy of removal of school fees for HIV/AIDS orphans, and other financial support for orphans and families affected has not been well taken up because of the stigma and discrimination feared in being so identified. This has been part of the `Four Free One Care' policy, but which apparently has only been taken up in a few publicised (well-known) areas such as in Henan Province. For other areas, local governments need to fund the policy themselves, but do not have the funds. The policy exists, but there is no enforcement (as in the case of child protection).

Responses

Thus, the lack of an existing and effective welfare and protection service for children to respond to these new problems in central China has led to an emergence of civil society associations to make provision. The underdevelopment of welfare services and civil society has led to other difficulties. First, the local situation is perceived as being akin to an emergency, given the numbers involved, the now apparently rapidly increasing death rate (certainly through the frequency of funerals (8)), and the scale of the problem in removing such a high proportion of middle/ reproductive age adults, parents, and leaving behind orphans, and perhaps some communities that may not be sustainable. In this situation, the urge is to get on and do something. Second, and linked, is that the general circumstances seem to be very clear, and so many responses are based on assumptions that are not correct. The issue of children being placed in orphanages provides one example. Children have been separated from their remaining family and often from their communities, albeit with the best intentions, but not with analysis of the best interests of children in the short or long term. Government provides no support for children when they are taken into kinship care, that is, into the often informal arrangements of care by extended family. Kinship care can thus present families with an additional financial burden, and relief only possibly available by identifying the orphan and so also his or her new family as AIDS affected, with consequent ramifications of stigma and discrimination. The removal of children to orphanages has increased the distress of some children who no longer see their grandparents, and who have lost any familiarity in their surroundings and daily life. Reactions of well meaning adults have often been to talk about the need for counselling for these children, the adults apparently not recognising how the children's installation in institutions has caused additional problems. In addition, the development of some charity approaches has led to children being taught to sing songs and perform in praise of potential donors. Some children have been taken round to show potential donors how sad they are in order to bring in more money.

Approaches based on children's rights are slowly developing, largely through the advocacy of international agencies such as Save the Children and UNICEF. The use of the term rights, particularly in context of human rights, remains sensitive in China because of the annual report of US government

and attempted use of `rights' as denigration of Chinese government. (9) Other issues are and have been also sensitive, in particular what has been suggested to be the `dark side' of society, such as emerging problems of street children, trafficking, children in conflict with the law, child labour, child abuse, and past issues such as the care for children in welfare homes. However, although the subject of rights remains sensitive in China, the use of children's rights is much less delicate, and Save the Children has been promoting rights based approaches, especially under the umbrella term of child rights programming.

Research involving children affected by HIV/AIDS

Save the Children already had an office base in Anhui, working in Hefei (the capital city) developing rural and urban community based child protection mechanisms through the initiation of children's activity centres (see West 2004), in partnership with local government. After negotiation with local government in north-east Anhui, an intervention was planned in the province prefecture that is most severely affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic begun through blood buying practices. Initial field investigations involved discussions with government workers, visits to villages and interviews with adults (Ji 2003).

As part of the process of developing rights based work, intended to be holistic and child focused, look at care, support and welfare issues, health, education and so on, a research project involving children defining issues and working with peers was undertaken in early-mid 2004 (see West and Zhang 2005 for a report on this work). A group of 28 children, most affected by HIV/AIDS, from different villages identified issues, discussed the causes and conditions of vulnerability, defined research questions, conducted research with peers in villages and participated in analysis of their results. Subsequently in August a children's forum was held, where a group of children from the research project and some other orphaned and abandoned children living in small group homes, presented issues through short dramas to a group of senior government officials.

Two sets of issues and findings emerging from this project are discussed here. First, aspects of children's perceptions and issues, especially problems connected with education. Second, the process and the benefits of the social activities involved as well as the research, which visibly raised children's self-esteem and confidence, enabled their communication, and ultimately provided psycho-social support, seen as a particular goal for many programmes working with children affected by HIV/AIDS.

Children's issues, school and education

While AIDS and the death of family members were prominent among children's concerns, other issues were raised as being of equal significance. Some issues around family, physical health and AIDS were closely linked. Children worried about parents becoming sick, too ill to work, but having to carry on, and dying. They worried about the health (and age) of their grandparents and other carers, and about their own health. The other issues of major significance included friendships, school and study, their future, and stigma and discrimination. The discussions of the children involved in the project and their categorisations of issues show the importance of understanding children's perceptions of their lives and their concerns. For example, children separated different aspects of what might be categorised together as `family' by others. Issues to do with family health were placed separately in a physical health category. The initial grouping `family' was largely about family relationships, especially disputes between parents and income problems. Problems of health, which were largely focused on family members, were grouped separately. Violence towards children, being beaten by parents (and other adults) was also placed separately.

Problems with education, largely conflated with school but also linked to their prospects as adults, relationships with teachers and other pupils, were some of the primary issues raised by children. These issues are not only limited to children in this location. It is clear from other research by children (10) and discussions and reports elsewhere, that education, specifically doing well at school and in test scores, is a major concern and worry of children across China.

Questions and issues associated with education were intertwined with others throughout the project. The education or schooling issue has multiple strands with many cross-connections. Doing well at school was seen by children as important for their future. Children were especially concerned about their future because of possibly having to care for parents, because family money would be used for medicine and because of the general uncertainties generated in communities by AIDS and the high rates of death. Children worried that if they did not get an education and do well at school, they would not have a good future. Around half of the nearly 200 children interviewed thought it would be easier to get a job if they received education, and the rest thought education would prevent them having to do manual labour to earn a living. Children's concerns about school included getting good scores (a sign of doing well), and worries that parents would criticise or beat them if they failed or did badly in tests. Children also worried about teachers criticising and humiliating them in class. Getting a good score was seen as reducing the possibility of dropping out of school, being looked down upon by teachers and peers and feeling guilty towards parents .

The costs of attending school were also highlighted as a problem by children. Paradoxically, one reason for adults selling blood was to obtain cash, which would have been needed for school fees. Now the costs of medicine and care for AIDS patients have depleted family resources. The illness and deaths of one or both parents reduce family income earnings. Families and children themselves have difficulties in raising money for school fees and for school equipment – pens, books, stationery. When parents do not have the funds, some children spend time earning cash for school by working (including begging and garbage sorting). This presents other problems. Working means that children's time for study outside school is reduced, yet homework assignments are also given in rural areas. Their energy for study work in school may also be reduced. But some poor families need children to work outside to bring in money, and have taken children out of school, even to work at begging. On the other hand some children see the seriousness of the family plight and say they want to migrate out to work to support the family, but parents insist they stay at school.

Children's options on attending school are also reduced by the need to act as carers for sick parents or to take over domestic duties in cases of illness or death of family members. Gender discrimination is evident here, with boys more likely to be kept in school when parents can afford to send only one child, and girls more likely to be kept out for domestic duties. In families, when the mother is infected by HIV, her daughter will take her place in looking after the family and doing household duties.

Although the government has recently (2004) abolished school fees for children orphaned by HIV/AIDS in this area, this presents additional difficulties for many children. Claiming a free place will identify children as being from families with AIDS, and the levels of stigma and discrimination are such that many children and their families do not want to, or dare not do this. Children have observed and felt discrimination and prejudice. They featured their experiences in the short dramas some devised and presented at a forum with government leaders in August 2004. They see discrimination between adults and experience it themselves from adults, and in bullying and violence from other children. Families are blamed for their HIV infections and having AIDS on grounds that they were too lazy to work to earn money properly and selling blood was too easy. Children and adults don't

generally refer to AIDS, but call it a `strange disease' or the `blood selling disease'. Another problem with making school free only for AIDS affected children is that it is discriminatory even in its own terms, because other children who are orphaned through other means, or are from families that are as poor, are not receiving such assistance.

The way children initially categorised `schooling' issues was to group together concerns of studying well, understanding, getting good scores and having good teachers. Although children fear teachers' criticisms, they group teachers into the good and bad. They worry that they or the school cannot get a good teacher, and they worry about teachers also dying. This suggests the potential and actual importance of teachers in the lives of children, for provision of psycho-social support as well as creation of a safe environment at school, and support for their study. The issue of school fees was initially placed separately, as were the problems of the hygiene of the school and its general environment, suggesting a perception of a marked difference in problems of access to school and the condition of the school, and the problems of studying and doing well.

Social activities and benefits for children (11)

The other main set of findings from the research project were the benefits accrued to children who participated. These benefits derived from the participatory approaches and methods used in the workshop. Children were taken seriously and adults demonstrated a willingness to listen to their concerns and exhibited an interest in their lives. Children responded through becoming lively and expressive, but also in forming new friendships, and in seeking out adults with whom to share their problems and concerns. *`Although I lost my parents I feel happiness and delighted at this time. It is the first time I feel so happy since my parents have gone.'* (letter from participant).

All participants, children and adults, were staying together in one place. Children were able to approach adults outside group sessions to talk about their lives and problems. In addition, the children supported each other and talked a lot together. In this way the project was more than simply research or consultation, but provided mutual support and understanding, and this happened because of the fundamental principles of the work and because the project was essentially focused on children's participation – consultation with children, decision-making, action by children. Adult-child relationships were crucial to the process of work in the project, but many (if not all) children were not used to adults spending time with them and listening to them and taking them seriously, the processes which created an environment that proved beneficial for providing support. Furthermore, the project brought together small groups of children who did not know each other at all beforehand, and so they also had to develop new relationships and the environment also needed to facilitate this. The workshop activities apparently provided children with an opportunity and a platform for help and support, in addition to self-expression and self-development. They all looked forward to the next activity. Some children kept in touch with each other after the activities by writing. During the weekend workshop activities some children gathered in one room to talk together for a long time. Adult visitors from government said how they noticed `more and more smiles on the children's faces'.

From the children's feedback it was found that the children were very enthusiastic about the variety of weekend activities. In the evaluation, most children said they are *very* happy, and that through this activity, they made many good friends, that they can communicate their innermost thoughts with others, and that they have broadened their vision. They hoped that activities like this can be held in the future. Some children wrote letters to others because they want to meet each other again. The children enjoyed the activities because of making and being with friends: *`I like this activity very much, I hope we can keep on holding this activity, and I want to be a `little journalist' [participant in project] again, because it gives me a lot of*

fun.' `I hope we will have such activity in the future. I hope I could make more friends, and could see you again. I also hope to be a little journalist again. My suggestion is you could ask more children to answer questions and it will encourage them.' `I hope we could make new friends, including: little children, young people, and adults.' `I hope I could meet my friends here during holiday, I hope we could help those children in difficulty and I could come again to participate activities like this, and will be happy like now.' ` `We could have more activities and we should care about and help those poor children.'

Psycho-social support, resilience and rights

Thus, all these elements of work are important as a practical aspect of psycho-social support that is so often identified as a need for children affected by HIV/AIDS, but not always discussed how to be achieved, except by `counselling' (see West 2005). This project showed how social activities provide such support. Also, the research work, workshops and the children's forum demonstrated children's resilience, which has been defined as the potential of these children to endure and flourish `despite extremely challenging and stressful family and social circumstances including, for example, emotionally incapacitated parents and extreme poverty' (Duncan and Arnston 2004: 10). Some identified characteristics of such children include: strong attachment to caring adults and/ or peer groups, encouraging role models, socially competent at interacting with adults and children, plays actively, curious and explores the environment, and others (Duncan and Arnston 2004: 10, adapted from the work of Donahu-Colletta). Many, if not all of these listed characteristics are aspects that were developed during this project work (although not intentionally with this in mind at that time). The workshops and research provided a safe interactive social environment with newly met adults and children; the workshops involved play as well as discussion and some learning (a child reported, *`I … think this activity is very good, it not only increased our knowledge but also expanded our view'*); the adult facilitators provided role models, and so on. It is the learning gained of the multiple benefits of these processes for children individually and socially that should inform work to be undertaken with orphans and children affected by HIV/AIDS in the future.

These social activities (meeting together, games, play, fun) and the workshop discussions both promoted resilience, and provided psycho-social support for children affected by HIV/AIDS. The children's forum evidenced children's support for each other, and a different type of relationships between the children and the adult facilitators who worked with them. Part of any response to the situation of children affected by HIV/AIDS in this area, by their own account as well as because of the evidence of this project, is to work against prevailing stigma and discrimination, and make practical provision to enable children to attend school. Some of the problems facing children, linked to discriminatory environments, also emerged in this workshop. Volunteer student teachers from local colleges helped with documenting the workshops, and older peer educators from the `better' schools in the town attended the forum. We found that the volunteers and peer educators did not know about the situation of these children and did not know there is a severe HIV/AIDS epidemic in rural Fuyang, even though some of the villages are only just outside the city and easily reached. However, through the activities, the children from the villages not only made friends with children from other affected villages, but also with volunteers and peer educators.

Going to school would enable the children to continue with study and education in an inclusive environment, and look to them developing and maintaining friendships, provided a friendly and inclusive environment is created and maintained. But the real circumstances of these children such as their bereavement, worries and concerns, cannot be ignored. The benefits children found from this project suggest that continued, regular social activities would provide the personal support, promote the resilience, the self-esteem and have someone to talk to, that would enable them to return to or continue

at school, and maintain friendships. Such social activities would be inclusive, bring affected and non-affected children together, and provide outlets for expression and the `social side of psycho-social support' (see West 2005).

However, there are difficulties. If the children were in mainstream schooling, there would probably not be enough time for such support. Some children at school have little free time because they spend most of their time in study. Some might not have enough free time because of having to do some housework as well as study. For example, one child explained how she liked the activities, especially it seems, because she had little chance otherwise to find social support: `*I hope we could do some activity, play games together just like before. We could have less games and more activities* [discussions, drawings etc] *as such activity is very good and make us relaxed and do not feel pressure. I don't* … [have much time] … *because I need to have tuition on Saturday, and on Sunday I have to go back home washing my clothes and taking care of my grandma. In the Sunday afternoon, I also need to have tuition, so the time is very limited.*' (case study of girl). These social activities might perhaps be provided at school, but this seems unlikely, because the success of the project was rooted in adult-child relationships that are different to the formal authority enmeshed in the teacher-pupil relationship. Also, there might still not be time, because of pressures (on teachers and children, see below) for children at school to be spending their time studying.

The problem for children is a double bind. On the one hand, looking to their future, they want and hope to be in the mainstream of school. But keeping up with the mainstream, might not allow for anything else, such as the combination of domestic work (and perhaps other work) and social activities that promote resilience. In terms of children's rights this raises questions over the degree of control, of participation in decision making, that is possible in the lives of children in the mainstream, for it is they who most often do not have `free' time. It also raises questions about the relationship between work and schooling, and the question of the right to play that is built into the CRC.

Participation and marginalised groups

Paradoxically, perhaps, in terms of the development of participation in China, it is the more marginalised groups who are easier to work with, and the mainstream that suggests greater difficulties. The simple reason is the question of time available for participation, which opens up also the issue of decision-making about use of time, and questions about definitions of work and leisure. Many children's time is consumed with the work and pressures of education, and it seems that only those not in school have time for `participation': school time and culture is structured against participation. Part of these issues also concerns definitions of participation.

In the Convention the idea of being involved in decision making on matters that concern children comes to the fore, as does right of association (with its implications for the development of children's organisations) and rights to information. Yet the term is notoriously difficult to define, which is why some agencies (such as the Save the Children Alliance) have been looking at the term `meaningful participation' and ethical guidelines, and participation essentially including consultation, decision-making, and taking action, and not limited to special occasions but as part of daily life.

Local interpretations of participation in China have included within the remit of the term, children undertaking activities, such as playing or performing, within the remit of the term. Children's fora and presentations at meetings have been more recently introduced, but run risks because they can fit with pre-existing notions of children's performance, particularly when the `best' children are selected for these activities. In this way some activities described as participation fit within existing cultural and

school structures, being performance based, in terms of children making presentations, announcements or statements that are often pre-prepared rather than spontaneous engagement in discussion.

Other activities are also locally seen as forms of participation, such as involvement in play or hobbies, generally in groups, and often organised. There is awareness of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, but part of Article 12, that `the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child' is often used as an excuse, that children are not mature enough to make decisions (see below). A national seminar in 2002 brought these distinctions of definitions of participation into view and led the All China Women's Federation to rework their plans for children's partcipation to be based more on children making decisions, consulting and taking action (See Zeng, Yang, West 2004). (12)

The involvement of children in decision making and consultation, raising their ideas and voices, has been discussed and recently begun to be introduced. However, the groups of children involved have largely been those living in institutional care or out of school, including `street children'. These initiatives have been useful. For example, children in care looked at the differences between residential and foster care, and the benefits and problems with each. Interestingly, one of the downsides identified with current forms of foster care was problems in accessing school, because of costs and location, but which was easier from residential care although otherwise foster care was largely preferred. Street children identified abuse, especially physical abuse as one of the main reasons for running away from home, in contrast to the causes often cited by adults, of children being lured by the bright lights of the city or driven by poverty.

But for children in school, as evidenced by children in this HIV/AIDS research project, time is so consumed with education work, that participation presents difficulties. Making a decision to participate in non-curricula activities becomes a significant choice for children when, and because, it will involve the use of valuable time. The workshops for the HIV/AIDS project were done at weekends, partly on principle of doing work at times suitable for and decided by children. Although children enjoyed the workshops, particularly those children much affected by HIV/AIDS, some were also aware of the time used which could otherwise have been spent on study. This difficulty of time poses problems in developing responses for psycho-social support and resilience for children affected by HIV/AIDS through participatory activities when children do not have time available. But, paradoxically, this problem could be overcome through children participating in decisions about the use of their time, although this would also require changes in, for example, school structures to be a real alternative. Thus, it raises broader questions about children's personal participation in decision-making over their use of their time, and to what extent adults will `allow' them to participate.

School as a basic divide in childhoods

The new and different emphasis on, and the importance of education across China (13), or rather, the importance of test and examination scores, is bringing a new social divide. The twin strands of this divide are being in school and out of school. Children out of school are those in diverse circumstances. For example, disabled children, girls, children who have dropped out of school, including some whose parents cannot afford to pay the fees, children who need to work for the family, children who have migrated themselves, often to the street, those trafficked, some children in conflict with the law. In addition, there are children in institutions who do not attend local schools or who stay at home because of stigma, such as some disabled children, or children who have never attended because of the cost of schooling/ migration.

The costs of attending school are higher for children not living where their *hukou* or residence permit is located. This affects migrants in particular. Although some fees have been abolished, there is still a fee for selection of the school. Migrant families have established their own schools, but beyond primary level, in order to get into higher middle school and beyond, or for a job reference, children need to attend a school registered by the Education Bureau, which will cost more. So, if children do migrate with parents, after attending primary school, they will usually return home to their *hukou* area to continue education – although this brings risks for some (such as abuse, as above).

Children in school are at different ends of a continuum. They may be studying all the time during the day and in the evenings and weekends on homework and extra lessons. (For example, one 14 year old in a city in south west China told of how all her time was consumed in study and additional classes, except two free hours on a Sunday afternoon. She spoke excellent English.) Further along the continuum children may have to study and do homework but also do domestic or other work (as in the example of the girl above, who takes care of her grandmother). The extensive protection of some children especially in urban areas, so that they can study hard (see Jing 2000 for more discussion), and the consumption of their time, may reinforce the view that children are not mature enough to participate in decision making: most of their time is given over to achieving test scores in a limited number of subjects. The focus of school is on those subjects that are tested. Mainstream schoolchildren are seen by some as lacking in life or social skills, and in matters of importance to them personally, such as reproductive health.

Schooling is structured around scores. Teachers' performance and promotions are assessed according to the rate of children moving on to a good school – that is a school were teachers are good at getting children through exams. If children can get to a good school (and stay there), to junior middle school, senior middle school, they will have a better chance of getting to a `famous university'. Private schools are increasing. For children unable to get a good score, then a vocational school beckons. Many disabled children, especially those with learning difficulties, are excluded from school. Various reasons (excuses) are given. But many teachers do not want to take children who are not going to score well or at all, because it will affect their performance evaluation. Also, when local government is calculating the rates of admission, disabled children are not included (known from at least one province).

The focus on scores is for progress through the education system and beyond, but is also the source of other problems for children. Children report that they will be badly physically punished by parents if they do not get a good score at school. At the national street children conference in March 2005, some street children who had done some research made a presentation, citing abuse as one reason why children left home. One boy said that when a child has already tried his best for a good score, but has only managed what he can, the parents should understand and not beat up their children.

The nature of the current divide of being in or out of school, with or without access to the scores, status and further study provided by education, has origins in economic reform. It is also connected with, and explained by, broad ideas valuing education that are said to be traditional. Both strands, in and out of school, offer challenges to the fulfilment of children's rights as expressed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The reasons for not being in school are complex. They go beyond non-enrollment, just as enrollment figures can obscure those who drop out later in the term. There are a number of issues around children being out of school that are often taken up under the headings of child protection, such as prevention of trafficking, issues of abuse, procedures in the justice system, and so on. Children out of school are

often seen as a major issue for rights-based and other children's development agencies, which frequently declaim a focus on vulnerable children.

But work on education and work with children in school, especially those potentially marginalised and excluded such as minority children, is also prioritised by many development agencies (including in China the British Department for International Development, the World Bank and Save the Children, working in Yunnan, Tibet and Gansu). The emphasis is on the development of quality of teaching practice, but also often associated with poverty reduction or other measures to enable children to go to school. The quality of teaching practice links with government aims for `quality education' and this may also open up the possibility of participation in schools.

Rights-based approaches aim to be holistic, not separating children's lives into different components, but in practice, projects tend to start from a particular approach or group of children. Projects might originate in identification of a category of children, such as street children or an issue such as trafficking affecting children, or quality of education. Thus, although three are clearly links between children out of school and education projects, the focus of school based education projects has tended not to be on issues such as street children, trafficking and children in conflict with the law. But work with those groups has often had aims to include them in the mainstream, that is getting them to school. There has also been a focus bringing education to such groups, because of difficulties of getting them into school. There has been recognition of the importance of education (and regularly attending some sort of classes) as a means of developing resilience for children's protection, and promoting their inclusion in mainstream society, as much as ensuring their rights to education. Bringing together these two strands of work (on children working/ out of school and education quality) into an integrated whole presents a challenge that is further complicated in China because, despite the focus of rights-based agencies on vulnerabilities, now the mainstream also presents problems.

Education and work

School and work have long been associated in China. For example, children in rural areas would work on the land after school (see Cleverly 1991). One informant recently shrugged her shoulders when discussing children and work, saying that it is expected that children in rural areas will do domestic work: there is no problem with this. Her argument for the differential protection of urban children was that they were single children and need to care for parents. In both cases an emphasis on the needs of parents. Others have also suggested the subservience of individual to collective or family requirements as a cultural characteristic, although it is difficult to generalise. Household production activities have increased in importance and scale following economic reform, with family members working on different tasks (Short and Zhai 1996). (But a striking point about this and other research, even on the care of children (Short et al 2001), is that children were not asked for their views.)

Thus, children's time has been consumed by household activities and might be argued as having been culturally appropriate for some time. There are shifts and differences in this consumption of time in rural and urban areas. Some recognition must be made of the general changes in culture and society, and an apparent need for adaptation. The question is over how that time is consumed, in what way, purpose and who is in control. The differences now are the apparently vastly increased pressures at school, which are focused on test scores but also reports of violence from parents and teachers, and exacerbated because of rising inequality. The pressures on children affected by HIV/AIDS in areas of severe epidemic illustrate the difficulties: some children have dropped out of school. Others are seeking to stay at school and do well, and are experiencing different kinds of pressure from teachers, peers, parents, discrimination from teachers and peers, and their own feelings of guilt or esteem if they do not

score highly – as well as the likelihood of then being a victim of violence. But attending school is not necessarily going to reduce the pressures on the children affected by HIV/AIDS, nor the burden of work.

Rights-based approaches have long recognised that there are circumstances where work is necessary and even beneficial and developmental for children, and that the model of childhood as a period of innocence, play and learning is a social construction of a particular time. The issue about children and work has become a focus on preventing exploitation and hazardous labour, as in ILO convention 182. Some work undertaken by children is seen as developmental, for example in enabling skills of relationship building with others, a sense of purposeful activity, feelings of contributing to family, self-reliance. The nature of the work is clearly important, for example work where children engage with other children and/ or adults, not in a harmful or exploitative way, but in promoting social skills.

The increasing recognition of education as a means of promoting resilience in children, has included aims of mainstreaming children into education as an important process of normalisation following emergencies (disasters) (see Nicolai and Triplehorn 2003). Many approaches for including children living in difficult circumstances, such as working children, street children focus on the idea of mainstreaming, which would mean children going to school. For example, the Government of India is taking up ideas of mainstreaming in policy for working children and street children, following changes to legislation for a comprehensive approach to care and welfare under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act 2000. Local non-government agencies in India are developing mainstreaming practice, emphasising education as preventative measure for young children and providing classes for older working children.

This new emphasis for protection work is on education rather than school. But there is often a conflation of the two. There appears to be a growing recognition that school can also be harmful to children, through bullying, emotional, physical and sexual abuse by teachers. Now it seems that the question of exploitation through `education' work at school and through homework and extra-curricula classes, also needs consideration. The pressures on time at school and schoolwork are not only about test scores but are creating undue worry and stress. The nature of school and work has changed, as the consumption of children's time in school and work has now changed. Some children are working only on schoolwork, some are working on schoolwork and domestic work, and some only on domestic and/ or cash work. What is the relationship between education, work and play for children, and definitions of these? How should holistic approaches for children's rights encapsulated in child-rights programming be applied? Where does participation fit?

Dilemma?

The findings of the children's research project discussed here highlighted the importance of school and inclusion, but also emphasised participation through social activities and taking children seriously, as a means of promoting resilience and dealing with difficult circumstances. The problem is that it would be difficult to develop equally participation both in education/school and social activities in the current situation. Mainstream school takes up a lot of time with homework and keeping up study to attain good scores. Children suggest they do not have time for social activities. In areas where children must also do domestic and other work, there is even less time. The balance of the problem seems to be the pressures created by education. These pressures can be challenged by taking up issues around children's time and decision making over their time, and promoting, for example children's rights to play (the rights of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to their ages of the child – article 31 of the CRC). Also, promoting children's rights to participation.

But the children most affected are not the usual core constituencies of many rights-based organisations. They are not those usually identified as the most vulnerable. They are not the children out of school, but those in the mainstream, the children in school. The children of middle classes may receive enormous support from their families but still experience pressures (for example, a primary school girl who cut her hands with a knife to avoid playing the piano her parents bought and made her practice – China Daily 2005a). The children of those less well off but not poor may face additional difficulties in striving to keep up but still having some domestic duties, particularly in rural areas. Challenging the education pressures for children on the periphery will not necessarily benefit them if they do not get the scores they want and need in order to go further in education. The problem is not only due to the system of scores, but is also one of policy and culture. Policy in the methods needed to access higher levels of education. Cultural in the values attributed to, for example, consumption, status, and competition.

Drugs and other parallels

There are certain parallels with children in the mainstream in Thailand, Japan and India, but other potential parallels with Thailand. Children there are also said to be a `king' (Chouvy and Meisonnier 2004: 123), (comparable with the `little emperor' phrase in China) and `too spoilt, too molly coddled' (ibid), and under pressure to do well at school in order to get to university (ibid: 127). There is also widespread use of *`yaa baa'*, madness medicine, amphetamine type substances in Thailand, largely produced in factories over the border in Myanmar. The drug was used in the past mainly by workers and truck drivers to enable them to work longer, but has also spread to schools. It is reported as used partly by some students to concentrate and study harder. Thai students are encouraged to memorise for tests, rather than understand, as in China, and are protected by parents in order to concentrate on their studies. `One yaa baa user says he continues to feel handicapped by [his] history of external control, "when we are children we are over-protected"' (ibid: 124).

The parallels on education, protection, tests and study, have or should have become more significant in China. Methamphetamine in Thailand is reported as now having a comparatively broad use among young people, but not distinguishing those in and those out of school. The largest amphetamine processing factory yet found in China was discovered on 20th April and destroyed on 5th June by the Public Security Bureau (Wang 2005). It was found in Fuyang, the area of the research undertaken by children, and the site of the severe HIV/AIDS epidemic in Anhui province. Where the drug was being sold and used was not reported.

Conclusion

What should the role of a rights-based organisation be? It seems that children's rights are being breached through excessive schoolwork. Children themselves speak of the pressures of education and their time. Challenging this situation will be difficult, since it is not in the interest of some parents and children to withdraw from the processes of heavy study unless everyone does. Yet it would seem necessary for organisations to begin to look at strategies for developing work to change this situation, unless they are only looking at the rights of the marginalised, excluded, poorer and disadvantaged.

The separation of children into broad categories, such as vulnerable and not vulnerable, does not work in practice, nor follow rights-based programming ideas. As the example of the HIV/AIDS project suggests, the two areas are linked: inequality has meant that some strive to become more prosperous, others to maintain their position. The new inequality has brought new vulnerabilities, for example, new opportunities for trafficking and new forms of exploitation of children for work. However, it seems

also to have brought new pressures for children in education, which for some, or perhaps many, create a range of sometimes intolerable stresses, and some children are harmed (or harming themselves).

One important outcome from the research project was the benefits to individual children of their participation in activities that took them and their views seriously, showed them respect as persons, enabled their decision making, and listened to the issues and problems that concerned them. As noted above this provided psycho-social support and promoted children's resilience. Extending this activity to the mainstream (for example, to schools) might be possible through the lure of the benefits brought to individual children that could enhance their future life. But taking this approach in the mainstream would also mean children having more say over their schooling and practice, which might ultimately suggest, for example, that a longer period at school is required in order that so much curriculum is not crammed into so little time. Examination, test and assessment methods could be changed. In this case, real participation would challenge certain fundamentals.

Problems stem from focusing only on different rights listed in the convention and how they should be interpreted: rights-based approaches agree that focusing on individual rights can work against holistic approaches. But using holistic approaches also means looking at the situation of all children in communities and states, and understanding how populations interact, not defining off categories. The question of how to balance quantities of play, work and education, and what they contain or mean, can be assessed across populations to analyse interrelationships and the differences in children's lives in a particular state or locality. Then looking at how to develop and integrate participation into children's lives rather than looking at fitting `participation' into busy schedules. These problems concern stresses and pressures but also quality of life. If children are not `becomings', not just the future but here now, which means recognition of them having lives, influence, rights and citizenship now, then concern for the quality of life is appropriate. These problems seem to involve fundamental questions about models of childhood.

If there are issues here, who is to take them up? A problem for many rights-based organisations is that they are focused on or have a mandate for vulnerable children. Many are also charities and their fundraising profile is constructed around the vulnerability of some children (or some situations that make children vulnerable, such as emergencies). A broader vision of the potential vulnerability (and resilience) of all children, for example to abuse, might not be welcomed by donors who differentiate between themselves and `others', and who prefer not to look at uncomfortable issues of underpinning relationships between differences in children's lives and expectations. At least that appears to be what some organisations fear, and do not seem to expend resources in raising awareness about connections and inequities. A solution to problems probably lies in increased acceptance and spread of children's participation, and the development of ethical approaches to working with children. Approaches which promote children's resilience in the face of vulnerability, but where children's consultation and involvement in decision-making, may enable changes in the fulfillment of children's rights, especially to protection and education. Children's perceptions of linkages, and ideas of justice vary, but generally are stimulating and show an enthusiasm for engagement and change.

Notes

1. Economic prosperity is certainly well known in UK following the proposal of Shanghai Automobile Company to buy Rover cars in early 2005, but then even more so through the June 2005 bid by the China state owned oil company CNOOC for the USA oil firm Unocal (still in process when this paper revised following the conference, see Guerrera and Politi 2005).

2. CCTV forum interview , 26th July 2004, with Wu Bao Guo Director General of othe Law Department of the State Council and Liu Fu He, Rural Development Research Institute of CASS, citing report of Liu Jian of the Poverty Alleviation Office of the State Council. (www.xinhuanet.com and www.chinapop.gov.cn accessed June 2005. Said to be reported in Renmin Daily 18th July 2004. In Chinese).

3. Research by several universities, here particularly Research Centre of the Ministry of Agriculture, in partnership with Save the Children, conducted 2003-04. Report forthcoming.

4. The Han nationality is the majority, with 55 other minority `nationalities' several of which are many million strong. There are other groups who also claim `nationality' status.

5. A recent poll (Sun 2005) has confirmed such earlier expectations suggesting that `more than 60 per cent of Chinese young people growing up without siblings say they felt lonely in their childhood'. However, others reported they enjoyed the attention and benefits of being a single child. While 46 percent of the 7,000 surveyed said they would prefer to have two children, fourteen per cent said they did not want children at all – with comments that it would damage relationship with their spouse. However, other reasons for not wanting children suggested elsewhere (many pers.comm.) concern the cost of raising children in cities.

6. A preference for girl children has been reported by many as emerging in urban areas, being seen as more likely to care for parents when they get older.

7. The rise of the phenomenon of `street children' alongside economic reform in China is a sensitive topic. It is paralleled in countries such as Mongolia and Romania, following economic transition after the breakup of the Soviet Union. In China office responses suggested children were often themselves to blame, running away for the bright lights, although poverty and family break up were also frequently cited. Domestic violence and abuse of children, also sensitive topics, were not publicly seen as major reasons. However, following a project involving street children doing research with others in government street children residential centres, some children made a presentation at a conference in March 2005. They cited abuse as a major reason for running away and not wanting to return to their families.

8. One village in Henan is reported to have had eleven funerals in one day, with only one funeral not being a death from AIDS. (Report from Chi Heng Foundation, an NGO working in Henan.)

9. This has been confronted in recent years, with the Chinese government pointing to their reforms on regulations for internal repatriation and American abuses at Guatenamo Bay and Abu Ghraib.

10. Children's concerns about education and extra classes are often reported in the press (for example, China Daily 2005b), and also emerged in other research by children (by children in care from several provinces, and by children and young people from south-west and north-west China – research in process of being written up by Save the Children).

11. Some of this section drawn from West and Zhang 2005, p 29-30.

12. Unfortunately the subsequent impact of the SARS epidemic in 2003 and the important changes in Party leadership and government, delayed implementation of the revised action plan.

13. There has always been an emphasis on education in China, but a shift with changes in literacy since 1950 so making it more accessible to more children on the one hand, but the emerging inequality, associated pressures and other factors tending to undermine this on the other, epitomised by scores. Not all children have access. There are particular problems in minority areas where Chinese being the second language (see Feng 2005) means that new teaching systems being introduced which paradoxically might have longer term benefits for previously disadvantaged children.

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