Children Learning in New Settings.

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In most of the preceding chapters of this book, authors describe patterns of learning by juveniles that are rooted in long-term and relatively stable patterns of biocultural adaptation. In part V, we shift our focus. Wolseth, in chapter 17, provides a vivid case study of children—many from rural villages—learning to adapt to an entirely new ecology: the streets of a large city. This chapter uses a wide-angle lens to briefly examine the many new settings that village children find themselves adapting to. Those settings include schools that have barely taken root in the village, labor, urban streets, and the milieu of the insurgent band. These close-up snapshots provide background for the next section of the chapter, which revisits the six principles enumerated in chapter 1 and provides a wide-angle view of childhood today.

Children Learning in Classrooms

In the late 1960s, I had an opportunity to observe Kpelle children eagerly participating in the new school just built in their village with American aid. However, the pupils’ near zero knowledge of English, which was the language of instruction, posed a daunting challenge, compounded by the facts that there were “no books in Kpelle homes to learn from, no library, no Sesame Street. Parents, almost all of whom are illiterate, [could not] teach their children what they are expected to learn in school” (Lancy 1975, 378). And the outcome was predictable as eager pupils became frustrated “school leavers,” a phenomenon repeatedly documented around
the world (Juul 2008, 153; chapter 9, this volume). At the Gapun village school in the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea, Kulick and Stroud (1993) found that children “learn very little during their first two or three years . . . due . . . to their inability to cope with instruction in English. . . . Outside of school . . . literacy skills are almost never used,” and after leaving school at age 14–15, “many of these young people may never read and will almost certainly never write again” (32).

In Chillihuani village in the high Andes, where hamlets are dispersed over a valley running from 3,800 and 5,000 meters, children’s attendance at school is limited by the harsh climate and the great distance they must walk. The monolingual Quechua children struggle with Spanish as the language of instruction, and the classroom is so overcrowded, many must sit on the floor. In spite of a sympathetic teacher locally, Bolin (2006) notes, generally, Indian children suffer harassment and other forms of abuse at the hands of mestizo teachers and students (85–87). Pygmy schoolchildren in Africa are harassed and bullied by children from more powerful Bantu tribes, and Central African government officials speak of them with evident racism and contempt. The obstacles they face mean that, according to a sympathetic teacher, they “sometimes take three to four years to complete a single year of normal schooling” (Raffaele 2003, 132). In Bangladesh, village children begin schooling quite late, having to overcome parental resistance, and their attendance is erratic. Hence, by adolescence, the average student has completed only three years of education (Nath and Hadi 2000).

It is quite common for parents to withhold their children from school or prevent them from doing homework, preferring them to seek employment for wages and/or do housework (de Oliveria 1995, 260). But families may hedge their bets (Bock 2002) and fund schooling for at least some of their children. In Port-au-Prince,

Ancillary school fees (for books, uniforms, and other supplies) are sufficiently high as to prohibit most poor households from sending all of the family’s children to school, despite the fact that primary education is free and compulsory for all children in Haiti. As a result poor families are compelled to make painful decisions about which children will attend school and which will be turned out onto the street to work and thus contribute to the household income. (Kovats-Bernat 2006, 108)
Conflicts between parental and school expectations are legion. Khmer parents can’t understand why teachers ask for their “support” but then reject corporal punishment as the best means of obtaining better performance from their children (Smith-Hefner 1993, 139). On Pulap Island (Micronesia), the school atmosphere does mirror village values, but that is not necessarily helpful: for example, “the atmosphere at the school is very lax and permissive . . . cupboards and shelves of the classrooms are in disarray . . . recess lasts two or three times the designated length” (Flinn 1992, 51).

For the forest-dwelling children of the Shipbo tribe in lowland Peru, schooling leads them to a dead end. Occupied with inscrutable classroom lessons, they aren’t learning from their environment or community members. They forego the benefits of traditional Shipbo culture, yet they learn so little in school, they carry to town no employable skills (Hern 1992, 36). Because the common folk theory is that children learn best on their own, villagers do not take pains to teach the knowledge and skills the children are missing out on (Godoy et al. 2007). In at least one case documented by anthropologists, the Cree did not even take the trouble to change their foraging trips to the weekends to permit the weekday students to tag along and learn to forage. “By the time they finished their schooling, they had become foreigners to Cree tradition, not only by failing to acquire skills and knowledge of the land but also by lacking an appropriate attitude for life on the land. Thus, formal schooling led to the weakening of the existing social system” (Ohmagari and Berkes 1997, 207).

In spite of poor prospects, it is usually the children who initiate and persist with school attendance. If the alternative is lugging around a cranky baby brother or weeding the garden or sticking around home all day helping mother, then spending a few hours in the company of peers, even under otherwise adverse circumstances, might not seem so bad. Guinean students “preferred school to being home, where they would have to do chores . . . the big punishment was to be bâni (banished) . . . from school” (Anderson-Levitt 2005, 988). And sometimes a student does beat the odds and succeeds, in spite of the obstacles (Hollos 2009). In fact, in interviewing these very ambitious students, many mention the desire to use their education and improved prospects to assist their families (Leinaweaver 2008, 72).

However, the majority will be disappointed and become angry and cynical (Davis and Davis 1989, 141–2). International programs that
have for decades promoted universal primary schooling have created “an avalanche of failed aspirations throughout the third world” (LeVine and White 1986, 193), and schools find themselves “in the business of producing failures” (Serpell 1993, 10). Particularly in Africa, frustrated “school leavers” of the 1960s and 1970s became the brutal “child soldiers” of the 1980s and 1990s (Honwana 2005).

The “education gap” between those born into a society that invests in education and those from a society that lacks the cultural or real capital to create successful schools is no longer synonymous with the North–South divide in economic opportunity. The rise of private schooling and transfer of cultural capital (appreciating the importance of storybooks, preschool, homework, computers, exam preparation) to third world elites has replicated this gap in every city and country (e.g., Boum 2008; Falgout 1992; Goody 2006; Kipnis 2001; Stambach 1998).

**Child Laborers**

Although difficult to assess, it does appear that child labor is increasing at a rapid rate. Millions of children who, in an earlier era, might have been gradually, comfortably, even playfully making their way to adulthood now find themselves virtual slaves, putting in long hours of backbreaking or otherwise physically or emotionally abusive labor. The rise reflects the fact that, in much of the world, carrying capacity has been exceeded and rural families no longer have enough land to support all the surviving children. In an ethnography of the squatter community of Baan Nua in Thailand, Montgomery (2001) found that residents had been forced to relocate because of crowding in their rural homeland. Baan Nua parents find that the best source of income is the prostitution of their children, nearly half of whom had been so employed (Montgomery 2001, 72; see also Rubenson et al. 2005). A second factor is that open markets force producers to pay the lowest wages possible, and children are often as productive as adults but at much lower cost. Mixtec villagers cannot all make a living off the limited amount of arable land, especially to meet new expenses like electricity, manufactured clothing, and taxes. Hence families now participate in an annual migration to the agribusiness-controlled croplands (e.g., tomatoes) in other regions of Mexico and in the United States. The output
of a child as young as 8 years old is comparable to that of an adult, and both are paid the same 27 pesos a day (Bey 2003).

In some respects, the Baan Nua children residing with family and Mexican children working alongside their parents are relatively “fortunate.” They at least enjoy the protection and guidance of family. In much of West Africa, child slavery is rampant, for example. “In the large Adjame market of Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, investigators discovered a ‘maid market’ wherein young girls were being bought and sold from a ramshackle, corrugated iron, and wood shack” (Bass 2004, 149). This “maid market” is rooted in traditions where poor rural families donate surplus children to better-off urban relatives (Leinaweaver 2008, 60). The girls, “little nieces,” serve as maids and in theory have access to improved opportunities, especially improved schooling. However, just as the kin ties may be fictive, the entire promise of “advancement” may be illusory (Jacquemin 2004).

This review could be extended almost indefinitely (Lancy 2008a, 99–105), but what can we say about learning? Two things seem self-evident. First, children who are removed from the traditional village setting are not learning the panoply of skills, concepts, and expressive culture that construct lifelong membership and survival in a viable community. Second, they are employed in the most rudimentary, unskilled, and dangerous jobs where there is little opportunity for learning or development. The most comprehensive ethnography of rural children as laborers was carried out by Olga Neiuwenhuys (1994) in India’s Kerala state. Villagers have two primary sources of income, the fabrication of coir matting (women) and fishing (men). Several things are clear from her analysis. First, children as young as 3 years old are employed. Second, without children’s labor input, families could not make ends meet. Third, the skills learned are rudimentary, and girls are kept from learning the more advanced skill of spinning so that they won’t be able to compete with the women.

**Immigrant Children and Their Families**

Throughout this work, children’s great capacity for learning and their ability to adapt to an enormous range of cultural conditions have been displayed. As bleak as these contemporary scenes are, it would be remiss on our part not to acknowledge the strength and resiliency children show
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in adverse circumstances. Kenny (1999) found that Brazilian children “acquire a certain amount of power or confidence in identifying and navigating the social world.” While a mother “felt paralyzed when confronted with the bureaucracy of the local health clinic or municipal office . . . and rarely ventured beyond the entrance to the favela,” Kenny noted, “children hop on buses and ride them for free, know[ing how to] hustle . . . and spend the better part of the day in [an] urban, informal labor market, amid the dangers, excitement, sights, sounds, and stimuli of life” (379).

The same skills that children apply toward learning the culture of the village can be equally effective in the city, as this example from urban African American communities illustrates. As the afternoon wanes,

small-drug transactions heightened, and the local “audience” of unsupervised children . . . grew . . . [One 14-year-old] remarked: “You ought to be out right now. This is when all the peeps [people] is hangin’. You learn about the streets now. . . . It’s good for a young brother to know the streets. You see everybody, styling and profiling. All the peeps see you. If you want to be seen, this is the time to be out.” (Burton and Graham 1998, 16, emphasis added)

Children’s adaptability is also revealed in immigrant and refugee families. Orellana’s (2001) study of Central American immigrant families in Los Angeles demonstrates how dependent they are on children’s rapid learning of the local culture:

[P]arents in Pico Union take it for granted that children should use their English abilities . . . to translate for them. Furthermore, there are complex English literacy demands for daily life in Los Angeles . . . and parents may need children’s help to carry out daily tasks. . . . In many ways they are the experts, and their ability to engage successfully with the complex demands of modern life matters for their families’ well-being and integration into U.S. society. Children’s work facilitates families’ access to information and resources. (378)

Many young people migrate without their families (Uehling 2008), and they may well end up on the streets. Clearly, the family structure remains important as the foundation for truly successful adaptation. Just as children are able to assist families, so too, families play a critical role
in ensuring that children succeed in school. Specific cases of successful migrant adaptation to the “information society” include: Vietnamese “Boat People” reading to preschoolers (Caplan, Whitmore, and Choy 1991); Central American immigrant parents ensuring that children avoid negative peer influence (Suarez-Orozco 1989); Punjabi families struggling to prevent children from becoming “typical American adolescents” (Gibson 1988).

**Escape to the Streets**

An extremely thin line separates “street kids” from “poor kids.” The Haitian children who are not sent to school may be much better off, at least in the short run. Kovats-Bernat’s (2006) account of street kids in Port-au-Prince is echoed in numerous recent ethnographies (Evans 2004; Hecht 1998; Kenny 2007; Kilbride, Suda, and Njeru 2000; Márquez 1999). He finds that hustling in the city is relatively lucrative. Children can expect to make “over three times the national daily wage through street labor” (Kovats-Bernat 2006, 108). Initially they may share much of their income with family. But when their contributions are not appreciated (consumed in alcohol by a parent), or worse, they are abused for not bringing home enough, they are likely to spend more and more time with their street family and less and less “at home.” Kenny (1999) asserts, “Living with one’s family can be one of the riskiest locations for a child . . . where abuse is more abundant than food” (384). This story from a young Brazilian woman is typical:

> I couldn’t stand to live at home anymore. My mother liked to hit us, she wouldn’t let us go out, we didn’t have any freedom. . . . [M]y mother wouldn’t let us stay home one single day, we had to work. (Campos et al. 1994, 323)

Still, many children do continue to share their earnings with and visit, even when the family is in a distant village. They do so as a form of social security. In the event of an injury, illness, or the need to escape apprehension for a crime, they have a refuge (Conticini 2007, 87; Kovats-Bernat 2006, 109). Some proportion of street kids may return nightly to their families in a squatter settlement, and indeed, their economic activity
may be managed by a parent or other family member (Lancy 2008a, 360; Sinervo 2009). However, the majority of children studied by anthropologists live entirely in public.

Street kids are more likely to be male, because girls are both more useful and valued at home and are simultaneously more vulnerable and
likely to become “damaged” in the street (Kilbride et al. 2000, 138). And cohorts of street children tend to be unisex. Children who enter the street unaccompanied quickly become attached to older and more experienced peers who readily socialize them to the culture, and that includes a designated territory. In the large Kenyan town of Makutano, the children’s territory is well known:

characterized by rubbish, open sewers, mud, and crime . . . in every way a . . . dangerous area to most inhabitants. To the children, however . . . it is their home, it is a safe, reassuring area buffered away from the dangers of the adult world. (Davies 2008, 320–1)

Children also learn the street slang, terms that only they use and which apply to elements of their culture (Davies 2008, 323). They sport a distinctive wardrobe, such as oversize coats to store or hide their “stuff” (Davies 2008, 324). Another universal aspect of the youth culture is glue-sniffing, which is replaced as a pastime in older children by the use and sale of hard drugs (Márquez 1999, 41).

Along with drugs, promiscuous sex is considered a form of play (Conticini 2007, 88). Resources may be shared, and older, more experienced children look after the “chupapegas . . . the youngest . . . living on the boulevard” (Márquez 1999, 40). These relationships may be of considerable standing and are legitimated when children refer to each other as spouses or siblings (Kilbride et al. 2000, 82–83). On the down side, children are also victimized by the police, merchants, the public, and especially other children. In Port-au-Prince, children engage in lage domi:

ritualized sleeping wars . . . considered by street youths to be a final solution to long-festering animosities that repeatedly emerge. . . . The final violent act is usually a blow . . . while the victim sleeps. . . . Nadès received a slash to the bottom of his feet, which he avenged by burning the foot of his tormentor with molten plastic. (Kovats-Bernat 2006, 130–5)

Intervention programs that remove children from this life-threatening environment have not been conspicuously successful (see chapter 17, this volume). Notable failures are those that “restore” children to the families that drove them away in the first place (Hecht 1998, 110). Russia has
2.5 million street children; however, except in a crisis, those studied by Fujimura (2003, 2005) generally spurn residence in public orphanages in favor of the friendships, freedom, and money they find in the street. Educational and vocational programs are also unattractive. One of Márquez’s informants quit the bakery job a nongovernmental organization (NGO) had arranged because he could earn in a day what the bakery paid per week. “He also worked with an NGO for a brief time but found the routine of picking up paper for recycling very boring and skipped work whenever he felt like it” (Márquez 1999, 56).

The remarkable fact is that the culture of the streets also features a sort of “chore curriculum” (see chapters 6, 7, and 17, this volume). Six-year old Reinaldo earned enough to support his mother and six siblings from tips earned guarding parked cars while their owners patronized local bars and restaurants (Kenny 2007, 76). The very young can also learn to become effective beggars:

Begging styles typically include not only verbal requests but also holding a hand out, pouting, exaggerated smiling, and less frequently, threatening gestures with the face and hands. . . . [S]treet children successfully beg from a full range of givers. . . . Street boys report that children can beg up to the age of 14 years, when they no longer look “innocent.” (Kilbride et al. 2000, 70)

Because there is vertical differentiation in the street economy, older residents are willing to train new recruits (Wolseth 2009), teaching them “the tricks of the streets: how to get more money while begging, how to break into cars, how to make master keys” (Márquez 1999, 64). Other sources of money or gifts of food include scavenging for discarded plastic bottles and charcoal to sell, and carrying luggage or running errands (Davies 2008, 318). Children graduate to more lucrative and sophisticated means of earning a living, “forming discrete occupational geographies that make up the nodal points in the networks of the urban economy” (Frankland 2007, 43). Informal sales through unlicensed marketing range from children’s toys to hard drugs. Street sellers may be well dressed and fluent in several languages. They may serve as “pilots” or guides: bayaye act as intermediaries between the customer and the vendor, leading the way to the market stalls and . . . as guides to sightseers, or directing European
sailors and soldiers to prostitutes” (Frankland 2007, 43). Children may thus earn significant sums, finding that they must pay “taxes” to various mafia-like enforcers and police and engage in informal banking to shelter their fortunes (Conticini 2007, 86).

Sex work seems also to be graded. Girls, whose money-earning options are more limited than those for boys, exchange sex for food and small gifts with fellow street kids. When eventually they make themselves available to tourists, “they do not have fixed prices for ‘services,’ do not identify as sex workers, and do not describe what they do as an ‘occupation’” (Kenny 2007, 85). Once they become prostitutes, they may earn more than their male counterparts who are occupied as street sellers and porters (Conticini 2007, 85).

Eventually, street “kids” age out. In Caracas, older youths earn the label malandro. These youths take pains to dress well and blend in, earning a living from theft. They “would not be seen as ‘street children’ causing mischief, but as malandros committing serious transgressions. They have outgrown their cute rascal image” (Márquez 1999, 53).

Child Soldiers

There is considerable overlap in the career of a street kid and a child soldier. The popular impression is that child soldiers have been abducted from intact families in rural villages, and that certainly accounts for a significant number, especially in Uganda (Mawson 2004, 133). However, child soldiers seem to be particularly prevalent where the birth rate is high, leading to a very youthful population, and the death rate of adults is high (due mostly to HIV/AIDS), leading to a disproportionately large orphan population (Case, Paxson, and Ableidinger 2004). The poor quality of schooling, noted earlier, and strained relations within families are also contributory. According to Rosen (2005):

the lack of education and job opportunities ensured an endless supply of . . . unemployable, and alienated youth. Sierra Leone was, and still is, a country filled with unwanted youth. Some portion of this youth were always available to be recruited into any setting—legal or criminal—that offered a hint of economic opportunity. (80)
Furthermore, the experience of life in an urban gang is in many ways indistinguishable from that in a “rebel band.” As described by Campos and colleagues (1994), in the city of Belo Horizonte,

the *turma* is a close-knit group that provides youngsters with support, companionship, and protection. . . . [N]ew members have to steal and prove their willingness to abide by group norms . . . [and] norm breakers are punished, with the ultimate punishment being . . . a ritual involving violence, torture, and gang rape. (324)

Contrast that with Honwana’s (2006) findings about the initiation and lifestyle of an Angolan child soldier:

[According to the soldier,] “We all had to drink two spoons of blood each. They told us that this was important to prevent us from being haunted by the spirits of the people we might kill.” . . . [T]ogether with strenuous physical exercise, manipulation of weapons, and the imposition of strict discipline, these practices represent a powerful ritualized initiation into a culture of violence and terror. (62–63)

There is evidence that those who would create juvenile militias recruit directly from urban gangs (Lancy 2008a, 301–2), and demobilized child soldiers readily transform into *mareros* or gang members (Dickson-Gómez 2003, 345). The “education” of a child soldier is, in fact, mostly indoctrination. After all, the current weapon of choice, lightweight, inexpensive assault rifles, “can be carried, stripped, and reassembled by children aged ten years or younger” (Dickson-Gómez 2003, 328).

As we saw with schooled children, the setting in which child soldiers find themselves is noteworthy for what they are not learning. “The exaggerated discipline of the guerrilla camps left little room for male adolescents to develop concepts of autonomy and control. They were not given a chance to practice and learn how to be campesino adults, dedicated to subsistence agriculture” (Dickson-Gómez 2003, 344). In Mozambique and Angola, Honwana (2006) notes that communities “are still dealing with the serious disruptions . . . in the life course of young people,” that the wars “left a deep moral crisis,” and that “the initiation rituals and systematic preparation of young people to become responsible adults ceased. A whole generation was seriously affected” (43).
Our Six Principles Revisited

By way of conclusion, I’d now like to revisit the six general principles enumerated in chapter 1. Our first was that, relative to other species, the length of the period of immaturity is elongated due, at least in part, to the need for children to acquire the vast store of information that constitutes culture. In the 21st century, this principle is challenged by a drastic bifurcation of childhood (Lancy 2008b).

In the developed countries, childhood has become dramatically longer, at both ends. That is, anxiety about the child’s success in school has promoted an attitude—supported by somewhat dubious scientific evidence—that insists on early cognitive stimulation of the infant. There is a blurring of the distinction between the infant and child stages, brought about, for example, by the use of gestural language (“baby signs”) with preverbal children. At the other end of the spectrum, we have “children” remaining at home and continuing as dependents well into their 20s as they finish their education and launch careers. Scholars now label them “emergent adults” (Arnett 2004). By contrast, in developing countries, overpopulation and economic stress have created new conditions whereby children are expected to make an economic contribution at an earlier and earlier age. Kenny (2007) describes poor Brazilian communities where children as young as age 5 are employed producing “much of what Brazilians eat, wear, and sleep in,” and that “cacao, gems, minerals, soybean, and grape industries all . . . use cheap (children’s) labor” (2). Childhood ends almost before it has begun.

Our second principle is that the end points of learning are culturally defined. In the ethnographic record, one finds considerable variation in village “curricula,” especially when comparing pastoralist, forager, and farming communities. For at least the last 100 years, that variability has steadily narrowed. This has occurred because of the reduction in ways that people find to make a living. The population of foragers has shrunk dramatically, and hunting, for example, may now be accomplished with the use of a few tools (outboard motors, rifles) where aboriginal hunters may have used literally hundreds of capture techniques—which children would gradually master (Nelson 1972). A second change that has narrowed expectations has been the global spread of state-sponsored schooling. The content of the curriculum and the methods of instruction, incorporating
rote memorization, recitation, learning in a second language, an emphasis on obedience and conformity, and identical curricula for both sexes are just a few of the characteristics associated with schooling throughout the world. Today, “diversity” in learning references relative success in progressing through the hierarchical school system rather than variation in the skill set with which one enters adulthood.

Our third principle identified the universal existence of folk theories or ethnotheories embedded in culture that describe child development and the means by which society is to assist juveniles on the pathway to adulthood. Traditional views have been challenged by the spread of schooling. In particular, the laissez-faire attitude adopted by parents in many societies, accompanied by casual child-tending practices such as sibling care, are now seen as incompatible with the need to prepare children for school and monitor and support their learning of academic subjects (Deyhle 1991; Matthiasson 1979). There is also a growing gap between societies that have entered the demographic transition (Caldwell 1982) and elected to reduce fertility and those that have not. Goddard (1985) describes a poor community in Naples that had, historically, depended on the wages its children earned in shoe factories but where younger couples are electing to have fewer children and to send them to school rather than put them to work. By contrast, in Burkina Faso, high birth rates are maintained in spite of near starvation living conditions. The theory that drives this behavior is “every child is born with its own luck” (Hampshire 2001, 115), and parents believe they have little to contribute to the child’s success or failure.

Our fourth principle is that learning is a social process. In the communities studied by anthropologists, children learn from observing and interacting with others. In the 21st century, this is changing. For first world children, knowledge is increasingly packaged in one form of “media” or another. Significant others serve less often as role models and more often as didactic teachers or guides. Schooling, in which one’s primary associates are same-age peers, begins at an earlier and earlier age and persists through adolescence. The consequent increase in peer versus adult socialization is a source of scholarly and popular attention (Harris 2009). Schoolchildren still learn in a social context, but that context is an institutional one that is expressly organized to support their learning. For impoverished children who live and/or work outside the home and/or are orphans, learning is also still primarily social, but the cast of potential
teachers and role models has changed. Now the child has far less opportuni-
ty to observe and interact with a range of neighbors, siblings, and rela-
tives and, instead, is primarily in the company of others of the same sex
and nearly the same age—whether living in a modern (e.g., small, nuclear)
family or a street family. First and third world children also encounter
adults whose roles (teacher, coach, therapist, police, NGO outreach
worker) vis-à-vis the child may be quite formal and even aversive.

Our fifth principle focused on the role of the child in taking the
initiative to learn her or his culture. Granting children the autonomy to
construct their own lessons and learn at their own pace works fine in the
traditional village where life skills are practiced and displayed in public.
The child’s observations, make-believe play, and repetition or practice of
fragmentary skill components should lead eventually to mastery. Such
“social learning” (chapter 5) has considerably less utility in the “informa-
tion” society where making a living depends on the long-term acquisition
of material that is essentially hidden from view and must be packaged
and delivered by experts. On the other hand, in societies where there is
rapid cultural change or radical disruptions in the traditional context (war,
famine, immigration), children may be expected or required to take even
more initiative to learn the “new” culture because traditional socializing
agents do not have mastery of it.

The sixth principle identified children as playing two distinct roles.
On the one hand, they are to play the role of child, a role partly scripted
by society and partly by the child. Indeed, we can expect some degree of
conflict between these two scripts. On the other, the child, again col-
laboratively scripted, occupies the role of an incomplete adult, an adult in
the making. In the village, there is the tendency to assign greater value
to the second role. The Baining claim to be ashamed rather than proud
of their children. They discourage play and other childish behaviors, and
they take pains to hurry children along in becoming mature social actors
(Fajans 1997). In the information society where the period of dependency
and learning has become greatly extended, children are treated as “cher-
ubs” (Lancy 2008a, 2) and their childish, immature behavior is celebrated
and prolonged via toys, birthday parties, and targeted media (Clarke
2008). In contrast to third world children risking life and limb, in the first
world, children’s lives are increasingly constricted. We are so concerned
about protecting their future prospects, we deny them the chance to be. A
study conducted in the United Kingdom, for example, showed a dramatic decline in the last 20 years in the number of unaccompanied children permitted to cross the street, go to the cinema, or use public transport (Qvortrup 2005, 8; see also Skenazy 2009).

For children in marginal communities on the urban fringe, neither role sits comfortably. Forced to work, they must relinquish the role of child, but the fact that they’ve become breadwinners for their families earns them “little increase in autonomy, power, or decision making” (Kenny 2007, 74). That is, their assumption of adult tasks, earning a living, caring for younger kin, and managing a household does not necessarily earn them the status and authority of an adult. The community may still continue to treat them as juvenile (Bissell 2003, 61).

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Note

1. Similarly, girls drawn into civil conflicts may have limited choices open to them. In the Liberian conflict, they mostly provided sexual services to the combatants (Utas 2005).

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