New Horizons Online • Volume 5 • Issue 1 • April 2011

Child Labor in Mexico

Author: Chase Bailey, '11
Department of International Studies and Political Science

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Mary Anne Dellinger
Department of Modern Languages and Cultures

Abstract: This essay represents the principal reflective component of the electronic portfolio for the VMI core curriculum course "SP311WX/Human Rights and the Hispanic Writer." In this class, cadets identify a specific issue pertaining to human rights in the Spanish-speaking world and complete a series of research-based assignments leading to the publication of an electronic portfolio (ePortfolio) to disseminate the results of their research. The course assignments vary in genre (a podcast, a blog, a filmed Public Service Announcement, email) and constitute the cadet's SP311WX artifact collection. Cadets showcase the artifacts they deem best represent the results of their semester-long research through the publication of the SP311WX ePortfolio, which takes the place of the traditional final exam. In the ePortfolio reflective essay, the centerpiece of the ePortfolio, cadets make connections between their artifacts and other learning experiences they may have had in demonstration of what they have learned about human rights issues in the Spanish-speaking world and, more importantly, how they came to learn it. The essay printed here is the reflective essay I produced for the class.

Each of us in SP311WX has had the opportunity over the course of this semester to choose a topic of research related to human rights. I have chosen to focus my research on the unfortunate issues surrounding child labor in Mexico. Using my artifacts as a guideline for exploring these issues, I will contextualize my research within the parameters of the following Core Curriculum learning outcomes: HIC-3—"Appreciate a culture's distinctiveness either through texts or experiential contact" and HIC-6—"Identify cultures of the world and the components and practices that distinguish them from others." To fully understand any issue such as this one, it is necessary to find its root source. In my opinion, Maslow's Hierarchy of Need Theory suggests this same principle. Maslow's pyramid demonstrates how to fulfill the criteria for the basic categories of needs before anything else. The physiological aspect constitutes the base of the pyramid as the "needs" category (such

as food, water, sleep, etc.). I would argue that before any complex plans are created (such as rushing the implementation of education into their society), the many physiological needs that have long remained ignored must be brought to full attention before the problems of child labor will be resolved.

Following Maslow's Theory, the first artifact I have included in my eportfolio supports the Physiological aspect through persuasive means. I produced a Public Service Announcement (PSA), a commercial-like film, designed to briefly grab the attention of my audience in support of the prevention of child labor. I began with a storyboard outline and then a full script for a video recording, which attempted to harness the imagination of the viewer through his own feelings. I asked the viewer to imagine his own child slaving away in fields with very little food or water. By the time his child is finished with his day's work, he is too tired to attend school. Thus education is almost non-existent. My PSA also allowed me to share evidence about the reality of child labor. For example, twenty-seven percent of the people of Oaxaca, Mexico are illiterate, and many children begin work (on average) at the age of eleven. Of the total population in Mexico, 27.5% are illiterate, 56.7% have not finished primary school, 45.4% of housing does not have proper water sanitation, 69.5% of people live in towns with populations less than 5,000, and 78.7% of the active economic population make less than minimum wage, which in Mexico is truly minimal. I concluded the PSA with both a list of good organizations to contact if anyone may be convinced to help and also my slogan: "Build a better world, stop child labor." Because I needed a precise argument that leaned towards a persuasive, rather than logical, attitude, I was not able to incorporate many of these facts within my PSA. I thought that Maslow's first step in the pyramid (referring to needs first) required such persuasion.

According to Maslow's Theory, the only way to completely satisfy all needs is to begin first with the basic necessities and then move up the pyramid to other needs (such as safety). In many ways, I view my first three blog entries within my eportfolio as the next step in the pyramid. My blog entries were useful mainly because they allowed me the opportunity to further explore the issues of child labor from more than one vantage point. Each blog has its own specific theme. For example, when preparing my second blog, I attempted to focus my writing around the theme of cause and effect. I asked myself what could be done to stop child labor (cause) and how would these possible solutions affect the outcome (effect). My first blog was simply an introduction to my discussion about child labor; Blog 2 began the "think tank" process of finding possible solutions to child labor; and Blog 3 can be seen as the next step on the pyramid as it addresses specific concerns that directly relate to the safety of children working on tobacco plantations in Nayarit State, Mexico. Authors claim that these Mexican children have been exposed to certain potentially harmful chemicals such as organophosphorus and carbamic pesticides. Concerns for the children have been expressed due to their smaller body mass, their height (proximity to the ground), and their more frequent hand to mouth ratio. The results of the blood samples taken from these children suggest that very young children are exposed to potentially harmful and toxic amounts of pesticides while working. Further research is needed to assess the actual acute and chronic health impacts of such exposures.

In Mexican tobacco plantations, large quantities of organophosphorous (OP) and carbamic pesticides are used routinely. Organophosphorous and carbamic pesticides depress levels of acetyl cholinesterase (AChE) which can lead to neurological impairment. Once safety issues such as these have been addressed, then we may pursue more long-term solutions to child labor.

Continuing up Maslow's Pyramid, my next artifact involves a brief examination of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This artifact meets the criteria of what Maslow refers to as the category of Love/Belonging. I created a small PowerPoint™ presentation incorporating various articles of the Declaration with pictures to represent them. Aiding me in my position against child labor, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights serves as a guide for the proper attitudes and behaviors of any state. Article 24 states, "Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay. Within my PowerPoint™ I presented Article 24 as a cultural product using the article definition written in Spanish on the left and a picture of three sleeping amigos on the right (this was intended to be humorous). Article 25 continues by explaining, "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control." Both of these articles reinforce the need for quality time spent with family or friends. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights should be considered the guide or even the standard of enforcement within the UN when debating the proper methods of the prevention of child labor.

I trust by now that a pattern is apparent within this analysis of child labor. In my opinion, each step of Maslow's theory must be met thoroughly before moving to the next one. Each of my artifacts listed above follows this pattern with purpose. [1]

There are those who believe that the way to deal with these issues is through the promotion of education that will allow these children to better society in the future. What they fail to realize is that most families cannot afford the loss in income at the present since many children earn just as much as their parents. This is why it is important to begin with the root cause of the problems. As we have seen, these can be found first with the basic necessities and then all the way up to the promotion of proper education last.

Notes

[1] While I only reached Maslow's third level of hierarchy, he gives a total of five steps.

Works Cited

Bailey, Chase M. "Build A Better World. Stop Child Labor." Virginia Military Institute. 2010. Film.

------. "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Latin America." Virginia Military Institute. 2010. PowerPoint™ Presentation.

Dellinger, Mary Ann (ed) and Chase M. Bailey. "Human Rights in Spain and Latin America." Virginia Military Institute. 28 April 2010. Blog.

Works Consulted

Maslow, Abraham H. "A Theory of Human Motivation." Psychological Review 50 (1943): 370-96. 30 March 2010. Web.