



## Book Review

# The Kids are in Charge: Activism and Power in Peru's Movement of Working Children

Taft, Jessica K. (2019). New York: NYU Press. ISBN 9781479854509 (paper) US\$30; ISBN 9781479862993 (cloth) US\$80. 272 pages

REBECCA RABY  
Brock University, Canada

Over the past few decades, recognition of children's participation in creating and engaging in the social world around them has become increasingly important to many child and youth scholars and advocates, but sometimes children's participation is discussed as if the idea is a brand new, Western idea. Jessica Taft's (2019) book on Peru's movement of working children provides rich, compelling, and inspiring evidence to the contrary, although she is also cautious not to idealize the movement.

Peru, as well as other parts of Latin America, has had a vibrant, long-term, participatory organization of working children and their adult *colaboradores*. Peru's movement of working children is mobilized around an understanding of children as political and economic participants, working together with adults to pursue children's rights to dignified work and other social justice issues relevant to children. Rather than write about the specific question of children's work, however, Taft concentrates on the history, values, processes, activities, possibilities, and challenges of this children's social movement. Her research is based on four ethnographic research trips to Peru that involved attending numerous organizational meetings, interviewing key children and adults, analyzing movement documents, and attending many events. Through her analysis, Taft deconstructs assumed binaries between adult and child, and narrow, naturalized understandings of childhood that are used to justify adults' rule over children's lives; instead, she outlines an alternative vision of childhood that fosters horizontal, intergenerational collaborations.

*Correspondence Address:* Rebecca Raby, Dept. of Child & Youth Studies, Brock University, St. Catharines, ON, L2S 3A1; Email: [rraby@brocku.ca](mailto:rraby@brocku.ca)

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*The Kids are In Charge* opens with information and history about Peru, and especially about the Peruvian movement of working children, including its somewhat complicated network of delegates, branches, and associated groups. The movement is linked to liberation theology, although over time the focus has shifted from a more overtly Marxist approach towards greater concentration on children's rights, activism and inclusion, especially in response to the International Labour Organization's aim to abolish early child work. Significant critiques of inequality and dominant power relations remain central to the movement, however, alongside commitment to broad social change.

In Chapter Two, Taft reflects on dominant and rival understandings of childhood that play a role in the Peruvian movement of working children. Current dominant views of childhood draw a rigid line between adults and children, romanticize children, and focus on children's protection, although more recently, global understandings of children as rights-bearers have also gained prominence, leading to tensions between protection and participation. Taft also highlights related, colonial models of childhood, which position Indigenous children and their parents as unruly and needing control. These understandings of childhood are contrasted with the Andean/Indigenous model, which considers children to be interdependent community members within networks of care, mutual respect and responsibility. Reflecting this Andean/Indigenous approach, and inspired by liberation theology, the Peruvian movement of working children centres on *protagonismo*, the idea that everyone, including children, has dignity and freedom, and that we are all collective social actors who should be involved in meaningful participation. This vision of childhood focuses on building intergenerational, horizontal politics in the face of ongoing assertions of adult power. Following *protagonismo*, the Peruvian movement of working children acknowledges and values children's broad experiences of work beyond the stark image of child labour that we most commonly read about. Instead, the movement recognizes and values the breadth of work that children do, including work with family and in the home, and is most concerned that this work is *trabajo digno* (dignified work).

The Peruvian movement of working children understands intergenerational relationships through a guiding emphasis on horizontalism, which is the focus of Chapter Three. Horizontalism focuses on equality of dignity, capacity, and insight: equality of dignity recognizes that both adults and children have equal worth and deserve equal respect; equality of capacity recognizes that both children and adults need to, and can, learn social movement skills; and equality of insight recognizes that everyone can contribute to understanding and analysis. These ethics guide the entire movement. Sometimes horizontalism can be tricky, though, especially within the broader global climate of adultism. For instance, the organization needs the involvement of adults, but adults must accept and embrace children's contributions and

decisions. Another obstacle is that experience is valued in the movement more than age, but age often brings experience.

Chapter Four, “Teachers, mothers and *compañeros*,” more deeply explores adults’ roles in the children’s movement, and how some roles are more likely to foster horizontalism than others. For instance, some adults in the organization are seen as motherly figures. While the motherly role can provide support, well-being, and deep listening, it can also reproduce a hierarchical relationship. *Colaboracion* as *compañeros* is seen as the ideal within the movement, but there are different views among the movement’s adults on what *colaboracion* should look like, with some embracing horizontalism and others more focused on being educators, which can be a more hierarchical role. A significant long-term figure in the movement, Alejandro Cussianovich, embraces a form of *colaboracion* that is premised on equality and a Freirian approach premised on feelings, emotion and love in pedagogy.

The issues raised in Chapter Four point to the ongoing need to navigate age-based assumptions and hierarchies within a children’s movement, assumptions held by both the adults and children. These challenges are further explored in Chapter Five, alongside organizational strategies that have been developed to address them. While the movement prioritizes horizontalism, it also embraces the goal that children should have more power than adults in the organization. On this basis, children are the ones who set the rules, discipline each other, and vote for delegates, including the adult delegates. Children are also encouraged to speak up, especially as adults talk more easily and frequently. At the same time, when adults aim to “orient” the children through education, conversations can be shifted towards adult views and values. Taft discusses how some of the adults are more conscious of this inclination and try to work against it. This is one of the few places in the book that focuses on gender, recognizing that the organization’s young women are more likely than the young men to gradually downplay their own voice and authority as they age into adulthood. Another challenge faced by the movement for working children, and other child-led organizations, is that as delegates gain experience, they are also growing older and new children must take their place.

The book’s final substantive chapter explores the broader impacts of the movement on policy, school, family, and on individual lives. Has the movement shaped policy? Has it positively influenced adult-child relations in schools, families, and broader society? The main focus of the movement is to increase acceptance of child workers, especially at the international level. The movement is also concerned with changing societal views about children and addressing other issues that affect children’s lives. These are challenging tasks, especially when it is difficult for journalists, policy makers and politicians to accept what the children are arguing, and when children do not have the resources to make significant changes without adult support. Taft notes that the children’s views are frequently dismissed, especially around the

issue of work. Despite these challenges, Taft sees how the movement has shaped the views of some politicians and the language they use to talk about children, how it has altered some family dynamics, and how it has shaped some policy. For instance, the Peruvian working children's movement has been involved in local participatory budgeting processes. Taft is quite cautious in viewing broad movement successes, however, as child-adult hierarchies remain rigid in Peru, especially in schools. She is more certain of how the movement has had a positive impact on the individual growth and futures of child delegates, many who are coming from impoverished backgrounds.

Over the last decade, we have seen significant youth-led, social justice activism around the world, facilitated by the ease of sharing information through social media. These young activists are celebrated as heroes, but they are also trivialized as young, inexperienced, and exceptions among children. As Taft argues in the book's conclusion, the experiences of the children involved in Peru's movement for working children are similarly fraught, and participants' advocacy is frequently dismissed. As Taft emphasizes, young people need real decision-making authority, not just voice, and Peru's movement for working children fosters this kind of horizontal, intergenerational activism and shared decision-making. Taft is careful not to idealize Peru's movement for working children, or to exaggerate its successes, but perhaps she consequently downplays the really exciting aspects of this movement. It has a long, deep, philosophically and politically grounded, social justice tradition. It has a fundamental ethos of equality between adults and children, and it has developed many internal, organizational practices that attempt to put this ethos into practice. Finally, those in the movement are speaking out, repeatedly, on children's right to dignified work and the value of children's work.

Taft is clear that her book is focused more on the organization of the movement, on the children as participants and activists, and on the promises and challenges of horizontalism, than on children as workers. She tackles this goal with accessible, compelling, friendly writing, and careful explanation of somewhat elaborate organizational dynamics. At the same time, Taft importantly keeps the discussion complicated in terms of thinking about conceptualizations of childhood, relations of power, and social movement challenges. Each chapter also opens with a captivating vignette that left me wanting more in terms of the children's stories and backgrounds with regard to their work, family and community. Such details emerge in the final chapter when Taft talks about the movement's impacts on the children's school and family, but I wished for more of these biographic details throughout the book.