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Psychosocial Dynamics in Children's Decisions to Work: A Study of Self-Efficacy, Social Learning, and Reciprocal Determinism in Rural Areas of North Sumatra

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Abstract:

The phenomenon of child labor in rural areas such as Sei Musam, Langkat District, North Sumatra Province is often explained solely through an economic perspective, while the psychological and social dynamics of children remain largely unexplored. This study aims to uncover the socio-psychological factors shaping children's decisions to work at school age, emphasizing the importance of integrating children's internal perspectives and their social environment in understanding this phenomenon. Using a qualitative approach with a case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with nine child workers and nine parents or supporting informants, and analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. The results of the study indicate that children's decisions to work are influenced by three main aspects of Bandura's social-cognitive theory: low self-efficacy in formal education, observational learning from the surrounding environment, and the reciprocal determinism mechanism between individuals, the environment, and behavior. Children are not only pressured by the school system but also motivated by a permissive social environment that normalizes child labor. Working becomes a means for them to build their identity, gain social recognition, and feel more psychologically empowered. These findings imply the need for social interventions that not only emphasize legal and economic dimensions but also consider children's motivations, perceptions, and social dynamics more comprehensively. This study makes an original contribution to the study of child labor by proposing a more comprehensive socio-psychological approach that focuses on children's subjective experiences, which have been largely overlooked in previous studies.
Keywords: Child Labor, Self-Efficacy, Social Learning, Reciprocal Determinism.

Abstrak:

Fenomena pekerja anak di kawasan pedesaan seperti Sei Musam, Kabupaten Langkat, Provinsi Sumatera Utara sering kali dijelaskan hanya melalui perspektif ekonomi, sementara dinamika psikologis dan sosial anak masih jarang dieksplorasi. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap faktor-faktor sosio-psikologis yang membentuk keputusan anak untuk bekerja pada usia sekolah, dengan menekankan pentingnya mengintegrasikan perspektif internal anak dan lingkungan sosialnya dalam memahami fenomena ini. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur terhadap sembilan anak pekerja dan sembilan orang tua atau informan pendukung, serta dianalisis menggunakan teknik analisis tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keputusan anak untuk bekerja dipengaruhi oleh tiga aspek utama dalam teori

sosial-kognitif Bandura: rendahnya self-efficacy dalam pendidikan formal, terjadinya observational learning dari lingkungan sekitar, dan mekanisme reciprocal determinism antara individu, lingkungan, dan perilaku. Anak-anak tidak hanya tertekan oleh sistem sekolah, tetapi juga terdorong oleh lingkungan sosial yang permisif dan menormalisasi kerja anak. Bekerja menjadi sarana bagi mereka untuk membangun identitas diri, mendapatkan pengakuan sosial, dan merasa lebih berdaya secara psikologis. Temuan ini mengimplikasikan perlunya intervensi sosial yang tidak hanya menekankan dimensi legal dan ekonomi, tetapi juga mempertimbangkan motivasi, persepsi, dan dinamika sosial anak secara lebih utuh. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi orisinal dalam kajian pekerja anak dengan mengajukan pendekatan sosio-psikologis yang lebih komprehensif dan berorientasi pada pengalaman subjektif anak, yang selama ini jarang disentuh dalam studi sebelumnya.
Kata Kunci: *Pekerja Anak, Self-Efficacy, Pembelajaran Sosial, Determinisme Timbal Balik.*

INTRODUCTION

Child labor remains a complex and pressing social issue in many countries, including Indonesia (Faridah & Afiyani, 2019). Children who should be enjoying their childhood and accessing quality education are instead engaged in economic activities that are inappropriate for their age. According to the definitions of UNICEF and the ILO, child labor refers to children under the age of 18 who are engaged in work that is harmful to their health, education, and overall development. These activities not only deprive children of their basic rights, but also increase the risk of violence, exploitation, and social inequality. Based on data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), in 2024 the number of child laborers in Indonesia will increase significantly, from 1.01 million in 2023 to 1.27 million children in 2024 (Purwanto & Ratri, 2025). The percentage also rose from 1.72% to 2.17% (Muhamad, 2024).

This figure indicates that an increasing number of children are involved in work, even in rural areas relatively far from economic centers, such as the Sei Musam area in Langkat District, North Sumatra. In this village, it was found that school-age children consciously choose to work and drop out of school. Interestingly, this decision is not always motivated by extreme poverty or family pressure, but rather by more complex social and psychological factors. This phenomenon shows that the issue of child labor cannot be simplified to economic aspects alone. The dynamics in the field show that there are internal factors within the children themselves, as well as strong social interactions in their environment that contribute to their decision to work. In this context, the issue of child labor is not only a challenge for child protection efforts, but also for the education system and society at large, which often fail to understand the psychological vulnerability and social pressures experienced by children in marginalized areas.

A number of previous studies have examined the factors that cause child labor from various perspectives. First, there is a group of studies that emphasize economic aspects as the dominant factor. For example, Artini (2023) shows that family poverty is the main driver for children to work. Muliyah et al. (2020) also found a correlation between poverty rates, low school participation, and children's decisions to work in West Sumatra. Another study in Mataram revealed that family economic pressure is a common cause of child labor.

Second, there are studies that focus on family background and parental education. Zulfikar (2018) states that low parental education levels influence children's decisions to work, as parents are less aware of the importance of education and instead allow or encourage their children to work. Third, structural-demographic research such as Alwi and Sirait (2023) links age, gender, and marital status of children with their potential to become workers. Male children or children from large families are considered more likely to work to support the family economy.

However, most of these studies tend to emphasize external and structural factors, while internal aspects of children—such as self-perception, personal motivation, and how they interpret their learning and work experiences—receive less attention. Children in this context are often positioned as passive objects rather than active subjects who make decisions based on their own experiences and perceptions.

This gap is important to fill in order to gain a more comprehensive and contextual understanding of child labor. This study aims to explore the causes of children working at school age in a rural context, specifically in the Sei Musam area, using a socio-psychological approach.

The main objective of this study is to understand the interaction between internal factors (such as self-efficacy and personal motivation) and external factors (such as peer influence, social values, and family attitudes) in shaping children's decisions to work. Thus, this study is expected to address the gap in the literature, which has focused too much on structural determinants and has not explored children's personal narratives.

This study is based on the argument that children's decisions to work are not solely the result of economic pressure, but rather the result of complex interactions between personal beliefs, social influences, and perceptions of success. Within Albert Bandura's (1969) social-cognitive theory framework, children learn from their social environment through observation of others' behavior and adjust their actions based on their beliefs about their own abilities (self-efficacy) and expected outcomes (outcome expectancy). Therefore, the preliminary hypothesis of this study is that children with low academic self-efficacy but who receive social reinforcement from their work environment will prefer to work rather than continue formal education. This study positions children as active social actors in shaping their life choices, rather than mere victims of oppressive social structures.

METHOD

The unit of analysis in this study is school-aged working children in Sei Musam Village, Batang Serangan Subdistrict, Langkat Regency. The focus of the research is directed at understanding how psychological factors (such as self-efficacy and personal motivation) and social factors (peer influence and environmental norms) interact and shape the children's decision to work. The children are positioned as active agents who interpret their social realities and make conscious decisions, rather than merely as victims of economic pressure.

This study employs a qualitative method with a case study design, as it is most appropriate for exploring the subjective meanings of the life experiences of working children within their psychological and social contexts (Rahim & Dilawati, 2022; Setia & Rosele, 2024). As Creswell (2018) explains, a qualitative approach is used when researchers seek to capture deep personal experiences in complex and social contexts. The issue of child labor contains psychosocial nuances that cannot be reduced to mere statistics or generalizations. Therefore, this approach is considered suitable for uncovering the relationship between individual and environmental factors in shaping children's life choices.

The study involved 9 (nine) working children as primary informants, 9 (nine) parents/guardians as supporting informants, and 3 (three) additional informants, including teachers and community figures. The subjects were selected purposively based on the following criteria: (1) under 18 years old, (2) currently not attending school, (3) has been actively working for at least 6 months, and (4) willing to be openly interviewed.

These children came from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and types of work, including both male and female participants. Supporting informants were selected due to their direct influence on the children's decisions, while additional informants were included to strengthen triangulation from the perspective of the social and educational environment.

Table 1. Research Subjects

No	Initials	Age	Gender	Occupation
1	DA	15	Female	Restaurant Assistant
2	AS	15	Female	Laundry Worker
3	YL	14	Female	Grocery Store Clerk
4	RN	15	Male	Farm Helper
5	DV	16	Male	Internet Café Attendant
6	NB	16	Female	Clothing Store Assistant
7	MS	15	Male	Car Wash Worker
8	FB	14	Male	Parking Attendant
9	NL	16	Female	Domestic Helper

Source: Researcher, 2025.

Table 2. Supporting Informants (Parents/Guardians)

No	Initials	Occupation	Status	Representing Child
1	SM	Entrepreneur	Biological Mother	DA
2	WT	Entrepreneur	Biological Mother	AS
3	JM	Entrepreneur	Maternal Grandmother	YL
4	AL	Farmer	Biological Father	RN
5	WD	Entrepreneur	Biological Mother	DV

6	ET	Entrepreneur	Biological Mother	NB
7	NR	Housewife	Biological Mother	MS
8	SF	Entrepreneur	Biological Mother	FB
9	SN	Entrepreneur	Biological Mother	NL

Source: Researcher, 2025.

Table 3. Additional Informants (Triangulation)

No	Initials	Position	Description
1	AH	Neighborhood Head (RT)	Local community figure
2	RR	Teacher	Previously taught AS, DV, and NL
3	DNI	Teacher	Previously taught YL and NB

Source: Researcher, 2025.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and field documentation. Interviews were conducted directly using an open-ended guide, allowing free exploration of the children's and informants' narratives. The language used was adapted to the subject's level of understanding. All interviews were recorded and noted with consent. Observations were carried out to capture the behavioral dynamics and social environment of the subjects, while documentation was used to strengthen descriptive validity, such as photographs of activities or working conditions.

The data analysis technique used a domain analysis approach (Miles & Huberman, 2013). The process began with data reduction through thematic grouping based on categories from Bandura's social cognitive theory: self-efficacy, observational learning, and reciprocal determinism. The data were then presented in a descriptive narrative format supported by direct quotes from subjects and supporting informants. Conclusions were drawn based on patterns and relationships among themes. To ensure validity, source triangulation (children, parents, teachers, community leaders) and method triangulation (interviews, observation, documentation) were applied. Research ethics were maintained through informed consent from parents/guardians, confidentiality of identities, and voluntary participation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Low Academic Self-Efficacy as a Trigger for the Decision to Work

The decision of children to drop out of school and choose to work is closely related to their low belief in their academic abilities (self-efficacy). The majority of informants reported experiences of failure, emotional pressure, and feelings of inadequacy that were repeated while attending school.

DA (15 years old), a worker at a food stall, admitted that he never felt comfortable in the classroom. *"I couldn't understand the lessons at school, so I chose to work instead. At school, I felt overwhelmed by all the lessons. Not to mention the homework, and I also got bored sitting in class for long periods of time,"* (Interview, January 10, 2025). DA's statement reflects the multiple pressures—academic, emotional, and situational—that have made school no longer a safe place for her.

AS (15 years old), a laundry worker, stated that academic difficulties made her feel incapable and uncomfortable in the classroom. *"I don't like studying because I can't understand the subjects at school,"* (Interview, January 10, 2025). The dislike for studying isn't just because of laziness, but because of repeated experiences with difficult material, without enough support from teachers or the learning environment.

FB (14 years old), a parking attendant near a market, experienced similar pressure. He said, *"I can't study, and every day I feel disconnected from the lessons."* (Interview, January 10, 2025). This statement reflects the negative affective states that formed while in a formal educational environment. FB experiences emotional and cognitive disconnection from the lesson content, which ultimately leads him to work as a rational escape. NL (16 years old), a domestic helper, also admits that she can no longer bear to be at school.

"I fainted during class once, and then I became more and more afraid to go to class. I feel like I can't go to school, really. I'm so tired," (Interview, January 10, 2025). For NL, school is not only mentally exhausting, but also affects her physical health. She experiences psychophysiological reactions such as excessive fatigue and anxiety, which led to her decision to drop out of school.

DV (16 years old), an internet cafe attendant, shared how academic pressure made him feel like he was always wrong and became the target of teachers' reprimands. *"Every day in class, I was afraid of being asked*

questions. If I answered incorrectly, the teacher would comment in front of my classmates. Over time, I started to feel like I was stupid," (Interview, January 10, 2025). In his experience, negative interactions with teachers created feelings of shame and loss of self-esteem, which then affected his self-efficacy as a student.

MS (15 years old), a doorsmeer worker, said that he often felt sleepy and did not understand the lessons, but was still forced to attend classes without any adjustments. *"At school, I often feel sleepy, not because I'm lazy, but because I help my parents at night. But no teacher understands. I became lazy to go to school,"* (Interview, January 10, 2025). MS's experience shows a lack of empathy from the school environment toward the real conditions of children, which impacts their self-efficacy because there is no acknowledgment of their difficulties.

NB (16 years old), who helps at his parents' clothing store, also admits to feeling empty while at school. *"At school, I feel empty. I sit there, listen, but nothing goes in. It feels like I'm useless in class,"* (Interview, January 10, 2025).

This experience shows how academic failure not only affects learning outcomes but also touches on the existential side of children as individuals who feel invisible or meaningless. YL (14 years old), a grocery store employee, refused to return to school because he felt that school did not provide any real benefits. *"What's the point of school? I don't understand it anyway. Now I work, I can buy my own phone credit, help my mother. I feel more like a real person,"* (Interview, January 10, 2025). YL associates work productivity with self-worth and feels that work provides meaning and a more valued social position compared to his role as a student.

RN (15 years old), who helps his father in the fields, said that he couldn't bear to let his father work alone. *"If I quit, my father would have to work alone, and I couldn't stand it... Eventually, I realized that I didn't want to see my parents work alone all the time. So this has become my choice,"* (Interview, January 10, 2025). RN's decision was not only based on academic failure but also on the formation of identity through moral values and responsibility that he learned from his surroundings. Finally, DA also added that after working, he began to feel more valued and accepted. *"At the shop, I can help customers and chat. I've even become more confident. It's not like at school, where I felt alone,"* (Interview, January 10, 2025). His work experience gave him space to rebuild his identity and self-efficacy. School, which used to be a place that broke his self-esteem, has now been replaced by the world of work, which—although challenging—provides recognition, positive interaction, and a sense of usefulness.

Table 4. Visualization of Self-Efficacy Indicators in Child Workers Informants

No	Informant	Mastery Experience	Vicarious Experience	Verbal Persuasion	Affective States
1	DA	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	AS	✓	✓	x	✓
3	FB	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	NL	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	DV	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	MS	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	NB	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	YL	✓	✓	x	x
9	RN	✓	✓	✓	✓

Source: Research Results, 2025.

The table visualizing self-efficacy indicators shows that all informants in this study experienced mastery experiences, namely experiences of failure or success that shaped their self-belief. In this context, almost all children reported experiencing failure in formal education—whether due to an inability to understand lessons, academic pressure, or negative interactions in the classroom—which had a direct impact on their self-efficacy in learning. Conversely, success in the workplace, such as being able to manage money, complete tasks, or gain social recognition, actually strengthened their self-confidence in non-academic contexts. This is in line with Bandura's theory (1997), which states that direct experiences—both failures and successes—are the strongest predictors of the formation of individual self-efficacy.

Indicators of affective states also appeared consistently in most informants. Children described intense emotional pressure while at school, ranging from feelings of inadequacy, shame, boredom, to stress and anxiety.

However, when they started working, they gradually learned to manage these emotions, such as calming themselves down when reprimanded or facing challenging work situations. This shows that self-efficacy is also formed through an individual's ability to recognize and regulate their emotional reactions to difficult situations. Bandura (1969) explains that perceptions of one's physiological and emotional states can strengthen or weaken self-efficacy, depending on how individuals interpret and manage these pressures.

The dimension of vicarious experience, which is learning through observation of others, was identified in almost all informants. Children absorb values and attitudes through observation of significant figures such as parents, peers, or coworkers. They imitate the work ethic, problem-solving methods, and patterns of responsibility that they see every day. In this context, the influence of the social environment is significant in shaping children's perceptions of success and the meaning of work. Bandura (1997) emphasizes that the modeling process is a crucial mechanism in the formation of self-efficacy, as it allows individuals to evaluate the likelihood of success by comparing themselves to their social models.

Meanwhile, verbal persuasion emerged in most, but not all, informants. Children reported receiving motivational verbal encouragement from their parents, coworkers, or other adults around them. This form of verbal persuasion, although simple, was able to reduce anxiety, foster courage, and help them stabilize their emotions. Some informants associated these messages as turning points in overcoming difficult situations at work. According to Bandura (1977), verbal persuasion not only serves as encouragement but also shapes positive expectations of success and increases the willingness to try.

In general, this table shows that the development of self-efficacy in working children is not linear but is formed through complex interactions between personal experiences, social influences, verbal communication, and emotional regulation. All children not only experience a decline in self-efficacy in the school environment but also successfully rebuild their self-confidence in the workplace. These findings support the idea of reciprocal determinism in Bandura's social-cognitive theory (1986), which states that individual behavior is the result of a reciprocal relationship between personal cognition, social environment, and actual actions. Thus, understanding the dynamics of self-efficacy is important as a basis for formulating interventions that more comprehensively address the internal and social aspects of children, rather than just economic or formal educational factors alone.

The data presented earlier illustrate that school-age children of workers in Sei Musam generally decided to drop out of school not solely because of economic reasons, but because they felt unable to keep up with schoolwork. They experienced mental pressure, discomfort, and feelings of failure that made school a stressful place. In contrast, the world of work provided them with a space to feel capable, valued, and useful. The experience of working provides these children with a kind of “substitute” for the academic success they have never experienced before. These children also learn important lessons from their social environment, whether through observing their parents and friends, advice from those around them, or how they learn to manage their emotions when facing pressure. All of these experiences shape the new confidence they have, not in the classroom, but in the world of work.

From the data collected, several key patterns emerged. First, most of the children experienced repeated failure in academic learning, which led to a decline in their self-confidence and interest in school. Second, they found a substitute for self-confidence through simple successes at work, such as being able to complete tasks, earn their own money, or help their families. Third, social influence plays a major role in shaping their beliefs and behaviors—both through observation of parents and peers (vicarious learning) and through encouraging words of support (verbal persuasion). Fourth, children also demonstrate the ability to manage emotional stress. Although they initially experienced tension at school, they gradually learned to calm themselves and act maturely in the work environment. These patterns indicate a shift in the orientation of success from the formal educational context to the work context, which is considered more relevant and meaningful to them.

These findings suggest that low self-efficacy in the educational context is a key factor driving children to choose to work. However, low self-efficacy does not mean that they lack potential or motivation; rather, it is because the formal educational environment fails to provide a supportive space for their psychological development. The world of work, although not ideal for children of their age, becomes a space where they feel capable, useful, and valued. This reinforces Bandura's theory of reciprocal determinism, in which self-belief (cognitive), social environment (social), and behavior (behavior) influence each other. Children are not merely victims of an unequal system, but also active agents who seek a place where they feel they have meaning. Therefore, approaches to addressing child labor cannot rely solely on economic interventions or formal education but must address the psychological and social aspects of children in a holistic manner. This study makes an important contribution by

showing how self-efficacy can break down in the classroom but grow in the workplace—and how social systems should be held accountable for reversing this condition.

Influence of Peers through Social Learning

Social learning in the context of child labor refers to the process by which children learn through observing the behavior of others around them, especially peers, family members, or community figures who serve as role models. According to Bandura, learning does not have to be through direct experience, but can occur through observation of the social consequences of others' behavior.

The results of this study indicate that although most children claim that the decision to work comes from themselves, the social environment still plays an important role in shaping the perception that working at school age is something normal, even exemplary.

One explicit example of the influence of social learning is shown by AS (15 years old), who openly stated that the decision to work was influenced by his peers. He said, *"Yes, many of my peers work, and they are one of the reasons I also work because I see that they can earn money."* (Interview, January 10, 2025). This statement reflects two main indicators in observational learning: imitation of behavior and observation of positive social consequences. Peers become behavioral models who provide a concrete example that working is not only possible, but also financially beneficial.

Although informants such as DV, NB, MS, FB, and NL stated that the decision to work was their own initiative, their narratives still indicate that they live in environments that have normalized child labor. DV, for example, stated, *"There are some friends who work too, but my decision was purely because I couldn't stand school anymore."* (Interview, January 10, 2025). This statement shows that although the primary motivation was academic pressure, the presence of working peers remained part of the observed social context. Similarly, NB stated, *"There are some, but my decision was purely my own."* (Interview, January 10, 2025). However, these statements cannot be separated from the assumption that children unconsciously absorb norms and values from their surroundings.

The influence of the social environment is also reflected in the statements of the parents. WT, AS's mother, said, *"He saw his cousin working, so maybe he followed suit. We never told our children to work."* (Interview, January 11, 2025). Although WT did not directly encourage her child to work, she acknowledged the possibility that AS imitated the behavior of his cousin or friends.

This shows the existence of a "silent model" that serves as a social reference for children in shaping their behavior without explicit instructions from adults. JM, the grandmother of YL, also said that her grandchild chose to work because he was bored at school.

She said, *"My grandchild said he was bored at school and couldn't focus on his studies. He asked to work, and I thought it was better than being lazy."* (Interview, January 11, 2025). This statement shows that child labor is considered normal by the family. In this case, the social environment becomes a space that indirectly reinforces the legitimacy of child labor. Even when parents or guardians do not directly encourage it, their permissive or passive attitude towards their children's choices actually reinforces social normalization.

Normalization of child labor also emerged from WD, DV's mother, who said, *"He asked for it himself. He said he was tired of school and stressed out by his studies."* (Interview, January 11, 2025). Although she did not mention any direct influence from friends, WD said that her child's request to work was accepted without objection. When parents do not intervene or offer alternatives, children's decisions are increasingly seen as natural. In this case, social learning takes place through passive reinforcement from the family environment, where children's work behavior is not only observed but also accepted and not questioned.

Social acceptance of child labor appears to be very strong in the surrounding community. DA stated that he was actually praised for being able to earn money at a young age. AS and YL also mentioned that they did not receive negative judgments from the community, as many other children in their village also worked. RN added that people around him often praised him for helping his parents, although he personally felt envious of his friends who could still go to school.

These narratives show that the social consequences of child labor are considered positive in the local community context, thereby reinforcing this behavior socially. Conversely, despite some negative views from a small portion of the community, children such as DV, NB, MS, FB, and NL stated that they learned to ignore cynical comments or pity from neighbors.

They prefer to interpret their decision to work as a form of personal responsibility. This indicates that social learning also includes a process of resistance to dominant values that do not align with their life experiences. These children actively choose which values and models they wish to emulate and which they reject.

Confirmation of this social normalization also emerged from AH, the head of the neighborhood association and a community leader, who said, *"If there are children who work, people say they are 'great, independent'. So it seems normal."* (Interview, January 12, 2025). This view represents the collective opinion of the community, which considers child labor a form of independence, not a violation of norms. Similarly, RR, a teacher who has taught several subjects, mentioned that many children see their friends or neighbors working and immediately getting tangible results, leading them to believe that school is too slow in providing benefits. This statement reinforces that social learning among children does not occur solely at home or with peers but also through interactions and observations in broader settings, including schools and the community.

Overall, this data shows that although children's narratives often emphasize personal initiative in their decision to work, this process cannot be separated from the social influences they continuously observe and internalize. They grow up in an environment that models child labor as something normal and even positive. Their decisions, though seemingly independent, are essentially the result of a complex social learning process—in which they assess, compare, and imitate what they see in their surroundings. In this case, Bandura's theory of *observational learning* proves relevant as a lens for understanding how social norms and collective behavior shape individual choices, especially in the case of child laborers.

Table 5. Visualization of Observational Learning Indicators in Child Labor Informants

No	Informant	Imitates Peer Behavior	Learns from Others' Experiences	Observes Social Consequences
1	AS	✓	✓	✓
2	DV	x	✓	✓
3	NB	x	✓	✓
4	MS	x	✓	✓
5	FB	x	✓	✓
6	NL	x	✓	✓
7	DA	✓	✓	✓
8	YL	✓	✓	✓
9	RN	x	✓	✓

Source: Research Results, 2025.

The visualization table of observational learning indicators shows that all informants in this study experienced social learning through observation of their surroundings, although not all of them explicitly imitated the behavior of their peers. Only three informants (AS, DA, and YL) showed direct indicators of "imitating the behavior of friends," namely, using peers who were already working as role models to be emulated. In the context of Bandura's social-cognitive theory, this represents the most explicit stage of modeling, where individuals observe the actions of a model, assess the consequences, and then consciously imitate them (Bandura, 1986).

However, although the other six informants (DV, NB, MS, FB, NL, and RN) did not explicitly state that they imitated their peers' behavior, the data showed that they were still involved in two other forms of social learning, namely "learning from others' experiences" and "observing social consequences". All informants (100%) met these two indicators. They observed how their friends, siblings, or figures around them carried out their work, earned income, were valued by adults, and felt independent—which then shaped their own perceptions of the value and meaning of working at school age. In Bandura's theory, this is called vicarious experience, which is the process of forming efficacy or behavior based on observations of the results obtained by others.

What is interesting is that in many cases, social learning is not fully recognized by children. They may state that the decision to work is their "own choice," yet they live in a social ecosystem that normalizes child labor. When they witness peers earning money, receiving praise, or even helping their families, these values are implicitly ingrained and shape their life preferences. This phenomenon is in line with the concept of silent modeling or latent

learning, in which a person learns from a model without the need for direct interaction or explicit intent to imitate (Bandura & Walters, 1977).

In addition, observation of social consequences is a very strong aspect of these findings. All informants observed that working children receive social recognition from their environment—whether it be praise for being independent, admiration from neighbors, or even simply acceptance that working at school age is normal. This recognition reinforces their belief that working is a legitimate and even honorable choice. In Bandura's theory, this process is known as external reinforcement, which is reinforcement from the social environment that increases the likelihood that a person will adopt the observed behavior.

This table also clarifies that even though some children stated that they did not imitate anyone, they were still in an intense social learning process. This reflects the important understanding that observational learning does not always take the form of direct imitation, but can also occur in the form of attitude and perception formation based on observations of norms, consequences, and social dynamics around the individual. Thus, the working children in this study are active subjects who continuously observe, evaluate, and absorb social values from their environment.

Theoretically, these findings show how social models in the form of peers, siblings, neighbors, and the local community are important actors in shaping children's work behavior. This challenges the assumption that children's decisions to work stem solely from economic or educational pressures. Instead, these decisions are the result of a process of internalization of social values that is ongoing and not always conscious to the children themselves (Bandura, 1986).

In the context of policy intervention, this understanding emphasizes the importance of changing social norms and value ecosystems at the community level, rather than simply improving school conditions or family economics. This is because if the surrounding environment continues to normalize child labor and reward it with recognition, children who struggle in school will be more likely to choose a career path rather than remain in formal education.

Thus, this table not only presents quantitative data on observational learning indicators, but also shows the power of the social environment in shaping children's perspectives and life directions. The social learning process they experience is very strong, even when they claim to make their own decisions. This is evidence that personal will in a society that shapes a particular social model is actually the result of a long-standing process of collective observation.

Based on data obtained from interviews with school-age working children, it appears that social learning plays a significant role in shaping their decision to work. Although many of them stated that the decision was their own, their narratives suggest that their behavior and choices were shaped in a social space filled with behavioral models from their surroundings. These children observe that their peers, siblings, or neighbors of the same age are already working and reaping tangible benefits from that decision—both financially and socially. Even when they do not mention direct imitation, their decisions still take place within a social context that supports, accepts, and even praises child labor.

In this case, social influence does not appear in the form of explicit pressure, but rather through the internalization of values that are observed continuously in everyday life. Children see, assess, compare, and unconsciously adjust their decisions to the norms that prevail around them. From the data analysis, several main patterns were found that show how social learning influences children's decisions to work.

First, some children explicitly imitate the behavior of their peers who are already working. They observe that working provides concrete results such as pocket money, independence, and pride, so they feel motivated to do the same. This reflects the direct modeling dimension in Bandura's theory, in which children consciously choose behavior models based on the results they see.

Second, even children who do not explicitly imitate still experience vicarious learning, which is learning from the experiences of others. They see how people around them—whether friends, older siblings, or neighbors—are rewarded for working and do not receive punishment or social rejection. These social experiences shape the understanding that working at school age is not a deviation, but an acceptable choice. In this case, children learn that there is legitimacy to work behavior from long-term observations of their social environment.

Third, there is a very strong process of social normalization, in which child labor is considered normal, even something to be proud of, by the surrounding community. This emerges from statements by community leaders and teachers who say that children see work as a quick way to get results, compared to the school path, which is

considered too slow. This social value reinforces the idea that children's decisions are the result of adaptation to prevailing norms, not merely a reaction to personal pressure.

Fourth, children actively respond to the social consequences of child labor, both positive and negative. They learn to ignore the cynical views or pity of some neighbors and focus more on the views that praise their work as a form of independence. This means that social learning does not only take place passively but also through critical evaluation of the environment's reactions.

Children sort out which values they want to accept and use as guidelines, and which they want to reject. Overall, these patterns show that children's decisions to work cannot be understood in isolation, but are the result of complex interactions between social observation, collective norms, and responses to social consequences.

The observational learning they experience reflects how they construct life choices within a community that is accustomed to child labor practices. In other words, children learn to choose work not merely because they want to, but because they have repeatedly observed that work is accepted and even valued by their surroundings.

Reciprocal Determinism between Individuals, Environment, and Behavior

Bandura's concept of reciprocal determinism states that human behavior is the result of reciprocal interactions between personal factors (such as cognition, emotions, and motivation), environmental factors (such as social norms, family support, and community expectations), and behavior itself (Bandura, 1986).

In the context of working children in Sei Musam, the findings of this study show that the decision to drop out of school and choose to work cannot be understood in a linear or singular manner. Instead, this decision is the result of a dynamic interaction between the children's inability to adapt to school, their families' permissive attitudes, and social support that normalizes child labor as an acceptable and even valued option.

Most of the children who were informants stated that the decision to work arose from personal desire. However, this statement cannot be separated from the influence of the surrounding environment, which either implicitly or explicitly reinforces this decision. DA, for example, stated that he felt unable to keep up with lessons at school and was more comfortable working. His parents, although initially disappointed, eventually supported his choice. His mother, SM, stated, *"At first I was disappointed, but over time I just went along with his wishes because he also felt more comfortable working. He can also buy things with his own money."* (Interview, January 11, 2025). In this case, personal factors such as discomfort with learning and feelings of failure intersected with an adaptive family environment, which was reinforced by new behavior (working) that produced tangible results and praise from the community.

AS experienced a similar dynamic. He struggled to understand lessons at school and felt emotionally uncomfortable in the formal learning environment. Although his mother, WT, initially opposed the decision to work, she eventually supported it after seeing positive changes in her son. *"I didn't used to, but now I do. Because my child is happy and never causes trouble,"* she explained (Interview, January 11, 2025). AS was also inspired by peers who were already working and observed that there was no social rejection from the community toward children who worked. In this case, AS's self-confidence was reshaped by new, more positive, and socially accepted experiences.

YL shows another form of reciprocal determinism. At first, JM's grandmother strongly opposed her decision to work. However, because YL's parents were permissive and she herself showed strong will, her grandmother eventually gave in. *"At first, I didn't agree and strongly opposed my granddaughter working, but what could I do? Her parents didn't oppose it and even supported her. I couldn't do anything,"* she said (Interview, January 11, 2025). YL herself stated that school made her bored and stressed, while working gave her a sense of responsibility and meaning. In this case, internal pressure, lack of academic support, and social acceptance interacted to form a new decision pattern.

DV, NB, MS, FB, and NL also stated that their decision to work was based on personal pressures such as boredom, anxiety, or feelings of failure at school. However, what really made them take the step was the fact that their surroundings—both family and community—did not resist their decision. In fact, some even expressed appreciation. WD, DV's mother, stated, *"He asked for it himself.* He said he was tired of school and stressed out by his studies." (Interview, January 11, 2025). Meanwhile, ET, NB's mother, said, *"I tried, but he said he prefers to work. I respect his choice."* (Interview, January 11, 2025). In this context, the children's decision to work is not only a response to internal pressure, but also the result of an environment that reinforces this decision through neglect and positive reinforcement.

Other subjects, such as MS, FB, and NL, showed a similar process. They had difficulty adjusting to school, felt unable to compete academically, and were more comfortable working. NL's mother, SN, stated, *"He is stubborn and headstrong. So I let him."* (Interview, January 11, 2025). This shows that when families lack the capacity or willingness to intervene, children's decisions become a form of passive consensus between individuals and their environment. Children's choices become valid not because of objective rationality, but because no one actively directs them back to education.

This finding is further reinforced by information from additional informants such as AH, the head of the neighborhood association in the area where most of the subjects live. AH emphasized that children who work are not viewed negatively by the community. *"I see that there are quite a lot of children who work, especially those who did not continue their education. Our environment is indeed more permissive, because on average the families are from lower-middle class backgrounds"* (Interview, January 12, 2025). This permissive attitude shows how local social norms have shifted to become more open to child labor. This means that working has become part of the social mainstream and is no longer questioned ethically or morally.

RR, a teacher who taught AS, DV, and NL, also added an important dimension related to the psychological aspects of children at school. He stated that these students tend to be passive, feel like failures, and lose their self-confidence in the classroom. *"NL once said that he feels more useful helping his family than sitting quietly in class"* (Interview, January 13, 2025). RR emphasized that even though the school tried to provide attention, if the family and community did not show encouragement for the children to stay in school, the school's efforts would be very limited. This confirms that *reciprocal determinism* works in three mutually reinforcing directions: the school weakens children's self-confidence, the family does not provide alternative support, and the community affirms the choice to leave the formal education system.

Support for these findings also comes from DNI, a teacher who once taught YL and NB. He stated that both children had expressed feelings of incompatibility with the way they were taught at school. NB specifically mentioned that he felt more comfortable learning directly in the workplace. *"At home, working is considered normal. In fact, it might even be seen as more mature for children to help earn money"* (Interview, January 13, 2025). Here, it is clear that the values that shape children's motivation do not come solely from within themselves, but also from their interpretation of what is valued by their social environment.

Finally, other subjects such as RN and DA also experienced similar conditions. RN had been accustomed to helping his parents in the fields since childhood and never felt that school was relevant to his life. DA felt proud because he could buy personal items from his own work. Both cases demonstrate that children's identities are not shaped by school but by work experiences that are perceived as more concrete, useful, and socially recognized. The interaction between feelings of failure at school, permissive family support, and tangible work outcomes forms a dynamic chain that replaces the educational pathway as the determinant of these children's life trajectories.

Table 6. Visualization of Reciprocal Determinism Between Individual, Environment, and Behavior in Working Children

No	Informant	Personal Factors (Emotion, Motivation, Self-Belief)	Environmental Factors (Family & Social)	Behavior (Decisions and Actions)
1	DA	Unable to keep up with lessons; feels more comfortable working	Mother was initially disappointed, then supportive; the community praised her for being independent	Chose to work and is proud to buy things on her own
2	AS	Difficulty understanding lessons; feels calm outside of school	Mother initially objected, then supported as the child became self-reliant	Works, inspired by peers
3	YL	Feels bored and out of place at school; wants to be responsible	Grandmother objected, parents supportive; permissive environment	Works, refuses to return to school
4	DV	Severe stress at school; wants to escape pressure	Mother understands and accepts the child's decision	Chose to work despite negative comments

5	NB	Incompatible with school learning style	Mother gives space and respects the child's choice	Works, feels more comfortable learning directly in the shop
6	MS	Unable to withstand academic pressure; feels like a failure	Parents were doubtful, eventually gave their blessing as the child is responsible	Chose to work full-time
7	FB	Unable to compete at school; more comfortable working	Permissive parents, no explicit prohibition	Works as a parking attendant
8	NL	Emotional pressure at school; stubbornly insisted on quitting	Mother let her go because she was insistent	Works as a domestic helper, learning independently
9	RN	School felt irrelevant; already used to helping parents	Family supportive, sees responsibility as natural	Helps in the fields, doesn't want to return to school

Source: Research Resultss, 2025.

Based on the data presented, it can be concluded that the decision of school-age children of workers in Sei Musam to leave formal education and choose to work is the result of a complex interaction between internal (personal) factors, external (environmental) factors, and their own actions (behavior). Although most children explicitly claim that the decision to work originated from themselves, their narratives indicate that this choice was shaped by a series of psychological experiences, social reactions, and family support. These children experienced emotional pressure at school, felt unable to compete, and lost their self-confidence. At the same time, the family environment is permissive, even passively supportive, because they believe that working is better than continuing to experience stress at school. In addition, the surrounding community gives social recognition to children who work, praising them as independent and responsible. The reciprocal interaction between these three elements slowly shapes new mindsets and behaviors in children, which then solidify their decision to work.

From the analysis of data on nine main subjects, several dominant patterns can be identified that show how reciprocal determinism works in shaping child labor behavior. The first pattern is the dominance of personal pressure stemming from negative experiences at school, such as feelings of failure, boredom, depression, or inability to understand lessons. All informants expressed forms of discomfort that eroded their motivation to stay in the classroom. Feeling unsuited to the learning system was the beginning of a crisis of self-efficacy that triggered a desire to leave school.

The second pattern was permissive or ambivalent attitudes on the part of the family. Some parents or guardians initially rejected their children's decisions, but eventually allowed or even supported them because they saw that their children were calmer, more responsible, or less troublesome after working. In some cases, parents stated that they had no authority to forbid their children because they were insistent and did not show signs of misbehavior. This situation reflects a family relationship pattern that tends to be reactive and passive, reinforcing the children's decisions through the absence of affirmation of the importance of education.

The third pattern is social support from the surrounding community, which indirectly normalizes child labor. The community praises children who work as being diligent, independent, and mature. Some informants even stated that working at school age is not an issue in their village. This is an indicator that local norms have shifted, where child labor is no longer considered a violation of rights, but rather an expression of social responsibility.

The fourth pattern is the reinforcement of behavior through the tangible results that children obtain from work, such as being able to buy things for themselves, helping the family economy, or feeling useful. After the decision to work is made, children experience internal and external reinforcement: they feel more confident, valued, and in control of their own lives. This pattern proves that actions (behaviors) strengthen personal conditions and also influence environmental attitudes—in accordance with the basic principle of reciprocal determinism.

Thus, these four patterns form a deterministic cycle: pressure from within the child meets powerlessness or acceptance from the family environment, then is reinforced by social acceptance and concrete results from work. The decision to work is not merely a fleeting reaction but the result of a lengthy process that brings together personal vulnerability, permissive social norms, and behavioral achievements deemed positive by the community. Within this

framework, formal education no longer serves as the primary arena for children's growth but is replaced by work experience, which is perceived as more meaningful and realistic within the context of their lives.

DISCUSSION

This study reveals that the decision of children in Sei Musam to leave formal education and choose to work is not entirely due to economic pressures, but rather to more complex socio-psychological dynamics. Three main findings were identified: low self-efficacy in formal learning, the influence of observational learning from the social environment, and the process of reciprocal determinism that brings together personal, environmental, and behavioral factors.

In this context, children feel more confident in the world of work because they receive recognition, concrete results, and a supportive social environment. Conversely, school becomes a place full of pressure, failure, and emotional discomfort. These findings can be explained through Bandura's social-cognitive theory framework. Low self-efficacy in school arises from failed academic experiences and repeated psychological pressure, causing children to feel incapable of surviving in the formal education system. Conversely, when they start working, simple successes such as receiving wages or praise reinforce their self-confidence. In this case, motivation to work is not merely a rational alternative to economic inability, but an expression of children's need to find meaning and self-confidence through a different arena. The family and community environment reinforces this decision with permissive attitudes and high social acceptance of child labor. When families do not reject it, schools do not provide adequate support, and the community praises children who work, a cycle of behavioral reinforcement is formed that accelerates children's exit from formal education.

These findings align with studies by Hendrizal (2020), which indicate that low motivation to learn is often caused by a combination of internal and external factors such as perceptions of inadequacy, academic pressure, and lack of family support. This is reinforced by research by Nandi (2016) and Ulha (2024), which states that material rewards (income) and job satisfaction are the main triggers for children to continue working. In a socio-cultural context, these findings are also consistent with the results of research by Ummah (2019), Munandar (2023), and Izziyana (2019), which show that social normalization of child labor forms new values that make work a symbol of maturity and success, rather than a deviation. This study adds a new contribution by showing how the three aspects of Bandura's theory—self-efficacy, observational learning, and reciprocal determinism—work together to shape children's decision-making patterns, particularly in rural contexts that have not been extensively studied from an integrated psychosocial dimension.

Socially, this research reflects a shift in values within rural communities, where education is no longer regarded as the sole pathway to social mobility. Recent studies indicate that in various global contexts, such as China and Pakistan, the effectiveness of formal education in promoting class mobility is increasingly being questioned. In China, for instance, the role of degree-based education in upward mobility has declined, replaced by vocational training and alternative routes that align more closely with labor market demands (Zhang et al., 2013). In Punjab, Pakistan, entrenched social structures diminish the power of education as a tool for mobility, as it fails to overcome longstanding inequalities (Naveed, 2024). Similarly, in agrarian societies of Eastern Europe undergoing industrial transitions, education is merely one among many factors shaping mobility structures (Bódy & Holubec, 2019).

Economic and cultural factors further reinforce this shift. Changing labor market demands now place greater value on practical skills over formal diplomas (Bódy & Holubec, 2019; J.-H. Zhang et al., 2013), while in China, the perception of education among poor families has shifted to “hopeless schooling,” a result of enduring structural inequalities (Ailei, 2019). In some cases, education is even viewed as contradicting rural lifeworlds centered on community and labor (Kleese, 2022). Furthermore, parental expectations toward education differ between urban and rural settings; in rural areas, education is seen primarily as a strategy to counter economic hardship rather than as a means for enjoyment or self-actualization (Wang, 2023).

Ideologically, these findings point to a redefinition of success—from academic achievement to economic productivity. Working children are no longer seen merely as victims of the system, but as agents actively choosing their own life paths. Processes of modernization and urban mobility have further accelerated this transformation, reshaping traditional family structures and educational values (Alpek et al., 2022; H. Zhang et al., 2023). Within Erikson’s (1994) psychosocial framework, the world of work becomes an alternative social space for identity formation, replacing schools that have failed to serve as arenas for personal growth.

On one hand, this research shows that the world of work offers children opportunities to build self-confidence, learn responsibility, and quickly adapt to social environments. On the other hand, however, this condition also indicates a dysfunction in the education system that fails to accommodate the diversity of students' capacities and emotional needs. Schools' inability to become inclusive and supportive spaces is evident in various forms, ranging from the misidentification of special needs in students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Sullivan, 2017), to the failure to provide adequate social-emotional support for high-ability students who experience underachievement due to unmet needs (Nannings et al., 2025).

This systemic problem is further exacerbated by educational practices such as the "key school" system, which intensifies academic pressure, neglects moral education, and causes emotional distress among students (You, 2007). Inclusive education efforts have also fallen short due to inadequate teacher training, flawed assessment mechanisms, and limited interventions for students with emotional and behavioral challenges (Karim, 2022; Thousand & Villa, 2014). As a result, many students—particularly those from marginalized backgrounds or with affective disorders—experience academic disengagement and eventually drop out of the education system (Calado et al., 2017).

Moreover, curricula that lack emotional competence development leave students psychosocially immature despite cognitive success (Souto Romero et al., 2015). Social inequality and segregation within schools also hinder the realization of equitable and inclusive education (Sciffer, 2025). When schools fail to create safe and supportive environments, children with low self-efficacy are likely to be pushed out and seek validation outside the formal system. In such contexts, families and communities lacking alternative perspectives or structural support tend to normalize these choices. This situation risks perpetuating the cycle of child labor and stunting their long-term potential as productive and educated generations.

Based on these findings, interventions to address child labor issues in rural areas such as Sei Musam must be designed in a multidimensional manner. First, educational approaches need to be reformed to be more responsive to students' diverse learning styles and emotions. Restorative learning and self-efficacy boosting approaches can be applied to rebuild children's confidence in learning. Second, family counseling and mentoring programs should emphasize the importance of long-term education over short-term economic returns. Third, the community needs to be engaged in a dialogue on values to deconstruct norms that normalize child labor, through community media, religious leaders, and village programs. Finally, local policies need to provide a transitional space that combines skills training and informal education for children who are already working, so that they continue to receive recognition of their identity without completely losing access to education. Policies based solely on a legal-formal approach will not be sufficient without dismantling the psychosocial roots that perpetuate this phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the decision of children in the rural area of Sei Musam to leave formal education and choose to work is not solely due to economic pressures, but is the result of complex dynamics involving psychological and social aspects. The main findings of this study confirm that low academic self-efficacy, the influence of observational learning on a social environment that normalizes child labor, and the occurrence of reciprocal determinism between individuals, the environment, and behavior are the main determinants in children's decisions to work at school age. Children who feel they have failed at school and do not receive emotional support from the education system or their families tend to seek alternative arenas to build self-confidence, meaning in life, and self-esteem through the world of work, which is perceived as more tangible, productive, and socially recognized.

The main scientific contribution of this study lies in its socio-psychological approach, which is fully integrated into the analysis of the phenomenon of child labor, which has traditionally been explained through a structural-economic lens. Using Bandura's social-cognitive theory, this study successfully expands our understanding of child laborers as active subjects who make decisions based on meaning formation, social learning, and identity search—rather than merely victims of external pressures. In addition, this study also enriches the literature by showing that self-efficacy can be contextual—low in education but high in informal work experience—and that social support does not always take the form of prohibition but can also be present in the form of permissiveness, which actually reinforces children's behavior.

However, this study has limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the limited number of informants in one village and the homogeneous social context make it difficult to generalize the findings to urban areas or across

cultures. Second, due to time constraints and access limitations, this study has not explored the long-term dynamics of work choices on children's futures, such as their impact on psychosocial development, family relationships, and social mobility. Therefore, further studies are highly recommended to explore longitudinal dimensions and involve comparative approaches across regions. Future research could also integrate interdisciplinary perspectives, such as behavioral economics, educational sociology, or work anthropology, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how child labor practices are shaped and managed in contemporary society.

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