Children's Work in Southern Africa [1]

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Abstract. This article questions the applicability of international standards on children's work to such situations as are found in South Africa. Differing contexts affect ideas of what is appropriate for children. Although South Africa has a developed economy and technology and aspires to full participation in the developed world, poverty remains a problem, as does quality and accessibility of schooling. These factors, together with different cultural views on children and growing up, affect experiences of childhood and of school, making them very different from the experiences of young people in the developed world. Although few children in South Africa are in regular paid employment, those undertaking part-time paid work often see this as a positive feature in their lives, while many find that unpaid work in the home can be a problem. Such children doing useful part-time paid work, as well as those doing excessive work in their homes, need protection and support, yet escape attention in international discourse on abolishing 'child labour.'

Keywords: childhood; education; child labour; domestic work

1. Introduction

Much discussion in this journal is about cultural influences on literature and language. In this article, I raise questions about how social and economic experiences influence values and the way people think about what is appropriate in childhood, and about the place of work in the lives of children. Standards that are assumed in much of Europe to be universal cannot easily be applied to the very different contexts of Africa, with their different experiences of childhood and of education. This creates a tension in South Africa, with its advanced economy

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[1] This article was written during my stay at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS) in Wassenaar in the Netherlands (2007/2008).

and technology that associate it with the developed world on the one hand, and, on the other hand, areas of poverty and underdevelopment that produce different needs and values.

My introduction to working children involved children living on the streets of Harare, Zimbabwe, who needed income to survive. Later I conducted research on children who earned their school expenses and much besides by contracting to work on tea plantations. Here far from hindering schooling, paid employment made schooling possible and allowed many children from poor families to complete their formal education and enter relatively well-paid white-collar work (Bourdillon 1994, 2000a). With the help of colleagues and students, I also collected information on children working in a variety of contexts in Zimbabwe, obtaining benefits for themselves and their families (Bourdillon 2000b). While life was hard for many of them, it would have been even worse if they were simply stopped from working. I learned to treat with caution middle-class orthodoxy about the evils of 'child labour.' [2]

When I talk in the Netherlands about my research and writing on the work of children, a frequent response is that such child labour is not possible in this country and is well controlled by legislation. A common assumption is that the fight against 'child labour' is resolved in the Netherlands, largely by legislation necessary for the protection of children. Government policy is in conformity with international standards promulgated by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), with pressure on trading partners in other countries to conform in the same way. [3]

When I speak on the topic to black people in southern Africa, a more usual response is that the concern about 'child labour' is an imposition by people who do not understand the cultures and economic situations of families in Africa. These people consider work essential to bringing up children with a sense of responsibility. Besides, the productive work of children is essential to the livelihood of many families on or near the poverty line. Here, people take for granted that children have to work. Some people observe that the campaign against 'child labour' provides an excuse for boycotting goods from poor countries and protecting the markets of the developed world.

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[2] I point out below that this term carries emotive and evaluative connotations, and is not exact as a referent. It should therefore be avoided as an academic descriptive term. I use it only when referring to the discourse of others, and draw attention to its problematic nature by using quote marks.

[3] See <http://internationalezaken.szw.nl/index.cfm?fuseaction=dsp_rubriek &rubriek_id=13042> and <http://www.minbuza.nl/en/developmentcooperation/ Themes/HumanRights>.

When I speak to working children, they are frequently concerned about payment for work and conditions of work. Almost invariably, they are concerned to continue with schooling and education. Particularly when they lack adult family support, they often wish for support that might reduce their work. But generally they do not want to be stopped from working or earning money. [4] They see prohibition as restrictive rather than protective.

Why do we find such contrasting views on what is proper for children to do? Is there any way of reconciling these diverse views?

2. Concepts of childhood and 'child labour' in Europe

Discourse about 'child labour' in Europe is dominated by a myth [5] that it is a stain on Europe's industrial past, in which children were the victims of unscrupulous industrialists; it has been eliminated by social concern and protective legislation; and developing countries need to be persuaded and pressurized to put a similar abuse of children behind them. This myth is linked to a romantic view of childhood as a time of happiness, innocence, and freedom from responsibility, which began to dominate in European and North American middle-class society in the nineteenth century. Any economic value that children once had as contributing to their family livelihood is replaced by a sentimental and moral value (Zelizer 1985). Alternative childhoods are depicted as 'lost' or 'stolen,' sometimes even as pathological and requiring 'rehabilitation.'

This romantic view of childhood allows no place for the positive experiences of children in contributing to family enterprises, or of learning to cope when adult support is inadequate or absent. Children are expected to work at school and perhaps help with household chores but other work is widely assumed (with inadequate supporting data [6]) to hinder attendance at and performance

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[4] See also *Kundapur Declaration* (1996) by the International Movement of Working children. Apart from research, I have helped organizations of working children.

[5] I use the term 'myth' in the sense of a story that is widely accepted and which structures thinking and values. This myth is discussed in Cunningham and Stromquist 2005.

[6] Research suggests that part-time outside work of up to ten hours a week does not adversely affect school performance and sometimes even enhances it (Stack and McKechnie 2002: 99). Full-time work (which is hard to define universally, but is generally over thirty hours a week) usually correlates with reduced school attendance. The effects of hours between ten and thirty-plus are disputed. Even where correlations are shown, the assumption that the work hinders school attendance and performance is rarely if ever justified: in the few cases that have been followed over time, poor performance or problems with schooling usually come first, and more time given to outside work is the response. This suggests that intervention should focus on school rather than stopping work.

in school. 'Child labour' is placed in contrast to school, idealized as a beneficial place for learning and development. Stories of the abuse of working children in the industrial past in Europe and media images of children abused in sweatshops in contemporary developing countries have given to the term 'child labour' the moral connotation of something evil and to be eliminated. Exposés of abuse of children in extreme conditions obscure the majority experience, in which working conditions are not extreme and work is often benign.

The term 'child labour' was first used in Britain in the nineteenth century to refer to the abuse of children in the workplace and is now sometimes contrasted with 'child work,' which has connotations that are more neutral. While the emotive and moral connotations of 'child labour' are widely (but not universally) accepted in English, precise descriptive definitions and usage vary according to the circumstances and aims of the writers and some argue that the term should not be used in academic discourse (Ennew et al. 2005; Bourdillon 2006: 1206-1208). Netherlands has an equivalent term, '*kinderarbeid*,' which carries connotations of being evil. This usage is widely accepted in the Afrikaans language, although a question could be asked about how widely the immoral connotations were accepted in the past, particularly with respect to Black children in a culture of apartheid. Some European languages, however, and many languages elsewhere do not have a ready translation for 'child labour,' with its connotations of being immoral. [7]

Reality diverges from the dominant European myth in a number of ways. Even in industrialising Britain, where the problem was first enunciated, only a minority of working children were in fact in industrial or mining enterprises. It is true that by the early twentieth century, the dominant activity of children up to school-leaving age became school rather than productive work. The effectiveness of legislation, however, in keeping children out of employment is disputed: change in Britain can also be attributed to improved access to education, reduced family size, changes in technology, and an improved economy. In Britain, legislation allowing a combination of employment and schooling helped the spread of education to children of the poor. There was initially some resistance from working-class children to compulsory schooling, which they saw as unpleasant

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Econometric tests to show that outside work generally affects school performance have yet to prove convincing (see the discussion in Edmonds 2008).

[7] In Italian, for example, the term '*lavoro minorile*' does not carry these moral connotations. A concerned group decided to translate 'child labour' as '*sfruttamento del lavoro minorile*' [exploitation of children's work]. See <http://www.infanziaediritti.it/prova/pdf/DocumentoPIDIDALavoroMinorileFirmatoal%2016-10-07.pdf>. I do not have knowledge of indigenous languages in South Africa, but there is no simple equivalent to 'child labour' in the Shona language of Zimbabwe.

and conferring little benefit (Childs 1992: 39, 73-8). Research on activities of children towards the end of the twentieth century suggests that part-time employment for adolescents, often in breach of national regulations, is a majority experience in such countries as Britain, the Netherlands, and the USA. [8]

The Romantic view of childhood seems to have gained strength towards the end of twentieth century. In the 1980s, international organizations were encouraging developing countries to take on programmes that combined education with production, in keeping with socialist ideals that education should train children to become productive members of their society (Myers 2001: 311-313). This idea was reflected in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1991) when it stated that education should be directed to the "development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential" and to "preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society" (Article 29). But these ideas have been largely lost in a heavy emphasis on literacy and numeracy skills in the 1990s, and in a determination to remove children from labour-force work.

3. Childhood and school in Africa

The myth is also problematic in the assumption that developing countries must go through a similar process of changing perspectives of childhood and changing treatment of children. Ideals of childhood vary. In most agricultural societies, as soon as children are able, they are routinely expected to contribute to the labour needs of the household, of family agricultural production, and of care of livestock. In this way they learn productive and survival skills, and establish their position in society. When people move to cities, children continue to have responsibilities towards their families. Relationships between children and adults are affected by diverse systems of kinship, in which parents often share responsibilities for children with their extended families. Kinship systems and cultures also affect the relationships between girls and boys. In many societies, transition to adulthood, especially for boys, is formally conferred by initiation rights rather than a determined age. So there are many ways of rearing children very different from those dominant in the developed 'modern' world, and these different ways have not been shown to be inferior.

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[8] White 1994: 860; Huijsmans 2004: 4; Lavalette et al. 1995; Mortimer 2007: 117. Hindman reports that in the USA today proportionately as many children work as at the turn of the 20th century, but the patterns of work are substantially different (Hindman 2002: 294-295). While some are concerned that children thereby suffer (e.g. Lavalette 2000; Landrigan 1993), others emphasize the benefits of part-time employment (e.g. Mortimer 2007: 122).

The African Union adopted the *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child* in 1991. This charter followed the direction of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child for many of its clauses, but made a significant addition. It stated that children have responsibilities to their families and communities, and to their countries: a child "shall have the duty [. . .] to work for the cohesion of the family, to respect his parents, superiors and elders at all times and to assist them in case of need" (Article 31). The work of children thus acquires more positive connotations than it does in a romantic view of childhood.

In Africa, histories of children's work are very different from those of Europe. A recent historical study of colonial Zimbabwe (Grier 2005) shows that the opening up of employment markets resulted in some exploitation and abuse of children, but it also provided boys and girls with an opportunity to break out of repressive patriarchal control and acquire a degree of independence. This could be especially important for girls who wished to resist pressure for early or undesirable marriage,[9] and many young people found in paid employment away from home an attractive alternative to heavy unpaid work demanded of them at home. Andvig (1998) points out that in Africa most children's work is under the control of the family rather than outside employers, and that a significant number of families are sufficiently unfriendly to children to make children's work within the family a social problem.

A childhood confined to the home of the child's nuclear family could be perceived as restrictive. Travel away from home is often constitutive of childhood and education. Young boys travel with herds in pastoral societies. Children are moved between branches of extended families, to make use of opportunities in different places, to learn responsibilities to kin, and to secure food security by spreading responsibilities for children. In many parts of Africa, travel away from home provides adolescents with opportunities for broadening their experience: young adolescents are expected to travel to learn about other places and to acquire skills while they learn to look after themselves through their earnings (e.g. Whitehead et al. 2007: 21; Thorsen 2006). Earning money to contribute to the family home can improve the status of the young person in the family. In some cases, employment away from home may be a way to acquire further formal schooling. [10]

Apart from cultural ways in which people perceive childhood, material factors also make childhood in Africa different from that in Europe. In Africa, 41 percent

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[9] It has been observed elsewhere that that the employment of girls delays the average age of marriage, e.g., Kabeer 2003, pp. 362; Amin et al. 1998.

[10] E.g. Bourdillon 2000a. Ainsworth showed that children travelling from rural areas to work in urban households in Côte d'Ivoire were more likely to receive schooling than the siblings they left behind (Ainsworth 1992: 7-8).

of the population were younger than 15 in 2005, compared with 17 percent in high-income countries. [11] Besides, in less developed countries, it is more difficult for adults to access good and reliable incomes, which affects both the ability of parents to care for their children and the tax base for government services. In such countries, children cannot receive the same levels of adult care as are expected in developed countries.

There are further specific constraints to children being able to depend on adults. Conflicts and disease – especially AIDS – have ravaged many communities. Sub-Saharan Africa had just over 48 million orphans under the age of 18 in 2005 of whom 9.1 million had lost both parents, representing approximately one in 40 of all children (UNICEF 2006: 36, table 2). Zimbabwe was estimated to have over 300,000 child-headed households in 2005. [12] In Swaziland, one in ten households is run by orphans. [13] Many other children live with incapacitated parents, and many adolescents become heads, or effective heads, of household and the principle breadwinners for their families. Children who head households often receive some support from kin or from neighbours, but they cannot simply depend on adults to run their daily lives. State welfare funds are overstretched and difficult to access – especially by children. Many young people must work for themselves and their siblings to have a home, to keep the family together, and to survive.

In many countries in Africa, the active involvement of children in armed conflicts belies ideas of the essential innocence of childhood, without guilt or responsibility for evil. Often children are compelled to join fighting forces and subjected to ordeals designed to destroy their values and turn them into violent killers. Nevertheless, their victims hold perpetrators to some extent responsible for their subsequent criminal actions, as do the children themselves (Wessells 2006: 223-224; Akello et al. 2006). Occasionally, ideas of the guilt of children goes to extreme forms, when they have been punished as evil witches (De Boeck 2005).

So perceptions of childhood and child work in Africa are often very different from dominant perceptions in Europe. To tackle the abuse of children through excessive or harmful work, a discourse is needed that is sensitive to African perceptions. [14]

The experience of school is also usually very different in Africa from the experience in contemporary developed countries. Far from being welcoming

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[11] See UNDP statistics at <http://www.un.org/esa/population/meetings/EGMPopAge/1_UNPD_Trends.pdf>.

[12] <http://ifsw.bestsite.ch/en/p38000535.html?force_folder=038000059>.

[13] <http://www.unicef.org.nz/school-room/hivaids/childheadedhouseholds.html>.

[14] Bass (2004) surveys positive and negative aspects of work for African children. Kielland and Tovo (2006) document the abuse of children at work in Africa.

places for children that provide appropriate learning environments, schools are sometimes grim, demeaning places where little valuable learning occurs. Many schools lack basic resources, such as textbooks, blackboards, desks, benches, and sometimes even classrooms. Teachers often have over 50 children in a class (Glewwe and Kremer 2006: 947). Teachers may be reluctant to work in remote areas. Shortages of teachers mean that some are hired without appropriate training and qualifications (Glewwe and Kremer 2006: 961).

Curricula are rarely adapted to the environments of poor children. Indeed, for many, the purpose of schooling is precisely to acquire the kind of knowledge that will allow them to break free of these environments. Children of the poor are at a disadvantage when they have to learn about things far removed from their own experience, and often taught in a language other than their mother tongue. Schools often do not provide a full education directed at developing all the potential of a child, but focus on particular book skills and may even result in loss of social and environmental skills (e.g. Katz 2004: 113-117). The result of poor resources and inappropriate curricula is low levels of achievement even in book skills. In Tanzania, for example, between 1997 and 2001, only 22 percent of students passed the primary education final examination, and only 28 percent passed the examination for the certificate of secondary education (Glewwe and Kremer 2006: 963). When schooling fails to result in good jobs and material improvements, children and families may decide that the expense and effort of schooling is not worthwhile. A large-scale study of children in Egypt showed that even when other variables are controlled, children in better quality schools tend to stay longer at school, suggesting that poor quality and low achievement diminishes the market value of schooling (Hanushek et al. 2006: 24-27).

Children attending school may spend time and energy in work unrelated to their formal lessons. Rural schoolchildren in Togo were responsible for rebuilding classrooms that had been ruined by heavy rain. Teachers required their pupils to clean the rooms that teachers lived in or fetch wood and water for teachers' personal use – perhaps even to work in the teacher's fields (Lange 2000).

School can be hazardous for some. A study of schools in Ghana, Malawi, and Zimbabwe revealed that sexual abuse of girls by teachers, other pupils, and sugar daddies was part of a wider problem of school-based violence that included excessive corporal punishment and bullying. All three educational systems revealed a reluctance to take action against teachers who engaged in sexual relations with girls in the school, or against boys who used threatening behaviour towards others (Leach et al. 2003: ix). In Nairobi slums, several people cited fear for their personal security as a reason for dropping out of school (Mudege et al. 2008).

Access to schooling may be inhibited by expense. Apart from fees that are often charged, children must acquire clothing and books to fit into the school environment. The loss of children's time for domestic and productive work may be heavy on poor households. Schools may be far from home, making them difficult or impossible to access, and using up more of children's time.

So both work and school have connotations for children in Africa far from those in a romantic idealization of childhood. In practice, the majority of children in Africa at some stage combine schooling with other work, both domestic work at home and productive work. People resent the imposition of standards that suggest such work is wrong – especially from people who are unable to resolve problems of irresponsible youth in their own countries.

4. International standards on children's work

International standards on children's work have been set largely by two conventions of the International Labour Organisation. Convention 182 on the urgent elimination of the "Worst Forms of Child Labour" was passed in 1999, and was rapidly and widely accepted. In this Convention, the ILO focussed on preventing harm in children's work rather than on preventing work as such. This Convention has not aroused serious controversy, although there have been difficulties in its implementation and there have been criticisms of the discourse used, which associates children's work with criminal activities and which does not pay sufficient attention to improving conditions of work.

More controversial is the earlier Convention 138 of 1973 on the "Minimum Age of Employment" (see our critique in Bourdillon et al. 2009). This Convention replaced earlier attempts to stop children from undertaking specific kinds of work deemed harmful, and aimed to achieve the "total abolition of child labour" (Article 1). It prohibited the employment of children under the age of 15 (or the age of completion of compulsory schooling, if this is higher) in "employment or work in any occupation" (Article 1). [15] The Convention allows domestic work within a child's home and work in "family and small-scale holdings producing for local consumption and not regularly employing hired workers" (Article 5.3). For children two years below the minimum age, the convention allows authorities to specify permissible "light work" that is part-time, safe, and does not impede

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[15] A lower age of 14 is allowed as a temporary measure in countries where the economy and educational facilities are insufficiently developed, a concession utilized by 25 African countries. Recommendation 146 (article 7.1) accompanying this Convention sets 16 as the ideal minimum age for all countries to aim at, but few countries have legislation conforming with this recommendation.

schooling (Article 7.1). It is thus against the Convention for children below the minimum age to find employment even if they are already out of school and have no chance of continuing their schooling. It is also contrary to the Convention for children below the minimum age for light work to help their parents in any commercial enterprise even in their own homes: while this is largely ignored in the case of family enterprises, children are frequently prevented from helping poorer parents who have no enterprise of their own and must work on those of others. Prohibited work thus includes many tasks traditional for children and generally considered part of acceptable child-rearing practice.

In the first 20 years after the promulgation of Convention 138, a mere 46 nations ratified it. These included the countries of the European lowlands (Netherlands, Germany and Poland in the 1970s and Belgium in 1988), but only five of the world's least developed countries and eight from Africa as a whole. Since 1994, there has been pressure, often linked to programmes of aid, for further countries to ratify the Convention, resulting in a further 104 ratifications, including another 35 from Africa.

Ratification did not always mean full conviction. Shortly after Zimbabwe ratified the Minimum Age Convention in 1999, the Minister of Labour and Social Welfare made a speech at a workshop in Harare on working children.[16] She associated some of the reports on 'child labour' in the country with "a ploy" by developed countries to justify boycotts that would protect their own markets. She commented that legislation alone is insufficient to resolve the problem and that strategies to eliminate 'child labour' must be part of a larger strategy to eliminate poverty. While outsiders sometimes speak of the lack of political will to enforce the standards, people in the countries concerned may be reluctant to enforce standards that they perceive as working against the material interests and broad education of their children.

5. Where does South Africa stand?

Much in South Africa's past should caution us against a simplistic adoption of romantic notions of childhood dominant in developed countries. There are evident cultural factors that indicate different ideas of childhood and of what is appropriate for children. In some ethnic groups, for example, boys acquire something of the status of adults through initiation rites, which sometimes take place even before adolescence, pointing to differing notions of childhood and adulthood (Burman 1986: 10). Other factors also produce different experiences of childhood.

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[16] Meeting sponsored by Save the Children Norway, 13 January 2000. The author holds a copy of the text.

Especially in drought-prone areas, families could improve food security by spreading their children out among kin and friends, where they would provide the usual services of children in exchange for care and keep (Waal 1996). Such practices helped to accommodate the system of circulatory labour migration (prominent in the apartheid era) between country and centres of employment, allowing children to remain in rural areas while one or both parents travelled to earn. The system of apartheid disrupted families and damaged lives of children in other ways. There have been studies of how specific children have been victims of apartheid, living in over-crowded hostels in Durban where families occupied one or more bed spaces; and in shacks in Crossroads in Cape Town (Jones 1993; Reynolds 1989). [17] In these conditions, children were subjected to violence in their daily lives and witnessed much more. Acts imitating violence became a regular part of children's play.

Cities in South Africa, as elsewhere in the world, have long seen many homeless children living and working on the streets, apparently outside the norms and control of established society. Jill Swart's (1989) seminal study of street children in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, shows these children upholding many of the values of the society they come from, sometimes going to great lengths in altruistic support of their peers. Elsewhere in the world, street children have found from their peers the support and care that the adult world has failed to provide (e.g. Hanssen 1996). In spite of childhoods very different from the Romantic ideal, they have experiences and relationships that are valuable to their development, in childhoods that are different but not worthless.

In 1976, thousands of school children took to the streets in protest against the 'Bantu Education' provided for Black pupils. Children were shot and killed; many were jailed; many lost years of schooling. From then on, children and youths took an active role in action, sometimes violent, against an unjust and oppressive regime. Sometimes they acted in cooperation with adult political activities: sometimes they acted independently. Life of violence became a heroic ideal for many children to follow especially in the cities (see Seekings 1993).

This is the past. Oppressive racial laws have been repealed, policies that put Black children at a disadvantage have been reversed, and the country has rejoined the international community. The country portrays itself as a modern state with an advanced technology and economy and a democratic concern for the rights of all its citizens. In spite of huge disparities of wealth and severe poverty in some areas, the country is trying to bring some normality and benefits into the lives of its children.

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[17] For various ways in which apartheid disrupted families and childhood among different racial and ethnic groups, see the essays in (Burman and Reynolds 1986).

It is not so easy to abolish the poverty that continues to bring about childhoods far from any romantic ideal. It is also not easy to provide for all formal schools the resources and quality necessary to educate children to become useful and responsible citizens. It is not easy to cater for around two million orphans in South Africa and 40 000 child headed households. [18]

In the segregated system of the apartheid era, African education was inferior in quality and short of resources. The South African Schools Act of 1996 was a first step towards correcting the situation. It made schooling compulsory for children between the ages of 7 to 15 or until they have completed grade nine. School attendance has been improved dramatically by reducing the student-teacher ratio to improve the quality of schooling (Case and Yogo 1999), and to a lesser extent by reducing poverty through pensions (Edmonds 2006).

But school attendance had long been high. The 1996 census showed between 90 and 95 percent of children aged 10-15 attending school (Statistics South Africa 2001: fig. 2). According to UNICEF, however, between 1996 and 2006, only 83 percent of children of primary school age were registered. [19] A countrywide survey in 2003 showed that only 80 percent of girls and 72,5 percent of boys aged 16-24 had completed their nine years of compulsory schooling (Operario et al. 2008: 177). While these figures compare favourably with Africa as a whole, they show primary education falling short for a significant number of children. So consideration of children's work cannot be based on the assumption that all children of school-going age in fact have access to quality formal education.

Steps were also taken to rectify injustices of the past with respect to children's work, particularly any suggestion that productive work rather than school is appropriate for black children. The 1996 Constitution of South Africa states that every child has the right to be protected from exploitative labour practices. 'Exploitation' normally refers to conditions of work, especially remuneration: protection from exploitation does not normally mean throwing people out of work or discriminating against them in the labour market – although the notion is sometimes applied to children in this way. The Constitution also states that no child may be required or permitted to perform work or provide services "that are inappropriate for a person of that child's age," or "place at risk the child's well-being, education, physical or mental health or spiritual, moral or social development" (Section 28, e, f). This rightly refers to all forms of harmful work and not simply to waged employment.

The Government of South Africa ratified the ILO's Minimum Age Convention on 30 March 2000, specifying 15 as the minimum age for employment, and the Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour on 7 June 2000. It started

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[18] See <http://www.unicef.org/southafrica/reallives_4265.html>.
[19] <http://childinfo.org/areas/education/table1.php>.

to develop a strategy for dealing with the problem of 'child labour' in the country. A draft "White Paper" was produced for the Department of Labour in 2003 (Bosch et al. 2003). On the one hand, this paper shows admirable concern for the specific problems of South Africa. It defines 'child labour' as work that is hazardous or harmful as prohibited by the constitution, and lists some attributes of work that should be considered (section 2.2). It suggests a strategy that includes alleviation of poverty and the provision of services to reduce children's work, particularly the provision of water and fuel in homes. The report thus attends to problems of excessive or inappropriate unpaid work. It also pays attention to improving schools and access to them.

Nevertheless, there is a difficulty in adopting the discourse of international standards that is not so sensitive to the situation of South Africa's children. The draft White Paper considered that it would be difficult to obtain political support for including unpaid domestic work that is detrimental to children as 'child labour' to be abolished. Abolition would, however, include work forbidden by the Minimum Age Convention, even when it is not shown to be detrimental to children – a point ignored by the draft White Paper.

International standards are necessarily general and cannot attend to the particular situations of children. The very worst forms of work, such as bonded labour accompanied by physical abuse, can be defined universally, but for most child workers assessment of harm depends on the aptitudes and situations of the children concerned. If a child is starving, work that provides food for the family may provide a net benefit to the child, whereas the same work might be considered detrimental to children who are well looked after by their families. When a child has a promising career through formal schooling, distracting outside work may hinder schoolwork. A child with limited aptitude for schoolwork and whose self-esteem is damaged by failure at school may benefit from achieving something in intensive work outside school (for an example of this in the USA, see Mortimer 2003: 138-139). Work in an abusive home may be more harmful than work in a benign factory away from home. When children find employment to escape abuse at home, it may be harmful to stop the work. The South African draft White Paper partly overcomes the insensitivity of international standards by insisting on consulting the children concerned, and by maintaining that the child's best interests should be a top priority in any action (section 2.5).

There appear to be few children in South Africa in paid employment – a 1999 survey showed 1,2 percent of girls and 1,5 percent of boys doing three or more hours of paid work per week (Lehohla 1999: 11). [20] Nevertheless, of those involved

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[20] These South African data contrast with the majority experience of adolescents in developed countries

in economic activities, 30 percent appear to be in breach of the law and the majority describe their work as hazardous (Clacherty 2002: 3). In 2001, labour inspectors invaded 15 commercial farms in Mpumalanga Province near Mozambique and found young children from across the border working long hours for little pay and with no chance of going to school. While such intervention conforms to international standards, it is not clear that this kind of employment constitutes the most widespread or worst forms of child abuse in agricultural work. [21] My experience in Zimbabwe suggests that more common, and sometimes worse, forms of abusive exploitation takes place in small-scale, informal agriculture, usually hidden under distant or fictitious kinship relations (e.g. Chirwa and Bourdillon 2000).

Another area in which the discourse of international standards can distract attention from where the children most need help is in child domestic work. There has been growing international concern over the abuse of children in paid domestic employment, and some calls for the abolition of such work. [22] A recent report shows less than half a percent of children aged 5-17 in South Africa to be in paid domestic work in 1999. Over half of these were doing less than eight hours per week (Budlender and Bosch 2002: 27-28, table 2; 34, table 16). This suggests that paid domestic work is not a widespread and serious problem.

Nevertheless, children often see a problem in unpaid domestic work. At a workshop for child researchers in the Eastern Transkei in 2007, children and young helpers expressed strong concern about work at home required of them by parents. In particular, fetching water for the home and caring for animals frequently interfered with school. Such problems appeared in a systematic consultation of South African children about their work (Clacherty 2002). Although many are proud of their contributions to the family home, some revealed unpaid domestic work to be a major problem. A recent survey showed that just over twenty percent of all children aged 5-17 spent nine or more hours in the previous week fetching fuel and water, and 13,5 percent were engaged in eight or more hours of household chores. Besides, six percent of children spent eight or more hours a week on school cleaning and improvements (Lehohla 1999: 25, 29, 30, tables 2.6, 2.10, 2.11). When the same children are involved in several of these

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[21] <http://www.afrol.com/News2001/sa026_childlabour_raid.htm>. In no way do I condone the exploitation and mistreatment of children in work, and especially of depriving them of a chance for schooling. The report, however, failed to consider alternatives realistically available to these children from Mozambique and assumed that farmers were wrong to employ children. It ignored the opinions of the children: indeed, labour inspectors were "shocked by the children's fatalistic acceptance" of their situation. Is it possible that the children had reason to seek this kind of employment? Do we know that they would not have been even worse off in their homes in Mozambique?

[22] See Pflug 1995; Black 2002. For a concerned but more cautious approach see Bourdillon 2009.

activities, they comprise substantial time in work apart from schoolwork. Sometimes, children are treated badly by relatives who are supposed to care for them: while in other cases relatives provide refuge from problems and excessive work at home (Clacherty 2002: 25-29). Sometimes benefits and detriment are inseparable. A 14-year-old girl was sent to stay with her aunt because her parents had no food and could not afford her schooling. The child complained about being made to get up at four in the morning to clean the house and fetch water before going to school and was constantly afraid of being beaten, but she appreciated the food and education she received from her aunt (Clacherty 2002: 26-27). Even parental authority can be abusive, and frequently burdens are placed more heavily on particular children, according to their gender or their ranking by age. In many situations, children find domestic work excessively heavy, and are sometimes afraid when their work takes them away from their homesteads.

Particularly difficult is the responsibility of caring for sick adults, and of running a home and caring for younger siblings in the absence of adults. Little if any of this work can be condemned as immoral 'child labour' to be eradicated: but support is needed – sometimes desperately – to reduce the work. Some parents and kin need to be made aware of the problems their children face.

On the other hand, children often perceive part-time paid work positively, particularly when it helps to cover school expenses (Clacherty 2002: 31-39). Strict conformity to international standards is likely to interfere with some of the paid work that children find helpful in their lives. International concerns about 'child labour' are, however, likely to ignore the major problems that children find in unpaid work they are required to do at home.

There are further problems with an uncritical acceptance of international standards. There is little information in South Africa on how and why adolescents decide to leave school. There is also little information on how young people navigate their way into the labour market (Seekings 2006: 16-7). A reliable strategy concerning children's work requires information on the role of work experience and economic activities in the transition to adulthood, and the extent to which these help or hinder subsequent employment.

Levine describes a workshop to prepare South African children for the Global March against Child Labour. She pointed out that even children who had been abused at work initially spoke about their right to earn and contribute to their families. Some children who initially spoke against being prevented from working, however, took up the slogans against 'child labour' when it became clear that this was required by organising adults. The poverty that made them wish to contribute to their families was ignored. Levine suggests that concern for eliminating 'child labour' distracts attention from, and even reinforces, serious social inequality that demands attention (Levine 1999).

6. Conclusion

Can the horror in Europe of 'child labour' be reconciled with a more positive approach to children's work that we find in Africa? I suggest that the European vision of children abused in European factories of the 19th century and in contemporary sweatshops obscures the reality of the lives of the majority of working children in such countries as South Africa. Moreover, it is not clear that a childhood without work and responsibility provides the best education for later participation in society. On the other hand, an assumption by African adults that there is no problem in requiring children to work also needs to be challenged by showing how this can interfere with schooling and the children's future.

I am suggesting that the educated middle classes dominant in Government institutions and non-governmental organizations easily adopt the discourse and values of the international campaign. It is difficult to resist the moral connotations against 'child labour,' particularly when acceptance of the employment of children might be construed as racial discrimination against some. It is not clear that this discourse is sensitive to the interests of working children in South Africa (or indeed anywhere). Further, it is often ineffective in helping children who are suffering from their work. Such discourse does little to address the poverty and inequality that lies behind much of children's workloads: indeed, it sometimes inhibits children's attempts to address their poverty. Intervention to improve the lives of disadvantaged children, therefore, cannot rely on the discourse of stopping 'child labour.'

For those who want to help the children, it may be better to return to the South African constitution, focussing on protection from harmful or inappropriate work and improving education, and at the same time acknowledge the benefits of children's work that are upheld in many South African cultures. Then there might be no need for concern over age-based prohibitions on part-time work or employment, prohibitions which do not always serve the interests of South Africa's children.

While children's views may miss major structural problems that society needs to address, children have a right to be heard on matters that affect their lives. [23] Perhaps it would be more useful to develop a discourse based on the observations of children on where their problems lie, and to help them give voice to these perceptions. Perhaps relevant adults would be more sensitive to these voices than they are to ideas imposed insensitively by outsiders who claim moral superiority.

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[23] *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child,* article 12; *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child* Article 4.2 (Organisation of African Unity, 1990). Although there is much debate on how this right is to e effected, it is widely accepted that children have a right to be heard and taken seriously in matters that affect their lives. See, for example (White, Sarah C. and Choudhury 2007).

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