“Child labour” and children’s lives

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Abstract

There is tension between two aspects of children’s work: work is a fundamental human and social activity, and therefore has a place in children’s lives and development; on the other hand, work demanded of children can be abusive, damaging their physical, social and cognitive development. The task of identifying the benefits and harm deriving from children’s work, particularly in the global South, is obstructed by widespread use of a particular concept of “child labour” that conflates harmful work with a minimum age for employment. The presentation uses recent documents to show how this conflation continues to interfere with understanding children’s lives and has consequences in intervention that are detrimental to children’s interests and development.

The problem

This workshop is about of theoretical concepts on childhood developed in the “Global North” translated into contexts of the “Global South”. I am not sure that “child labour” qualifies as a theoretical concept: a concept is an abstract idea, and the term “child labour” covers a variety of ideas. Moreover, the problems raised by the term are not confined to the “Global South”. Nevertheless, the term as widely used among middle-class and wealthy people does cause problems for understanding children’s work in a variety of contexts; it is therefore worth critical consideration.

I illustrate the problem with a recent study by Save the Children India (Bhullar *et al.* 2015) on children working in the growing garment industry in New Delhi. The report focussed on 148 children working on outsourced piece work in their homes, and 22 in informal workshops, or *addas.* It shows evidence of sound qualitative research,

[1] This version includes sections omitted from the oral presentation, and additional comments arising from discussions at the workshop

incorporating the views of the children concerned and of their families, but it leads into policy that seems to diverge from the research findings.

The home-based work was generally undertaken willingly: only one child mentioned being pushed into it. Apart from the way it contributed to the family enterprise, or perhaps because of this contribution, 92 percent of the children reported being happy in their work, and not all the other comments were negative. The report comments:

> … most children do not mind doing some work during the evenings – it kept them occupied and was found to be interesting, some in fact enjoyed doing this work. There is a sense of pride amongst children that they can undertake such work. Young children enthusiastically explained how it took them just 10 minutes to finish pasting stones on an entire "neck-piece". (p.27)

Yet the report assumes children's quality of life will be improved by gradual withdrawal from this work.

The report raises some problems with posture and lighting (children worked behind closed doors and shutters so as not to be seen). It mentions children's right to leisure; but it also mentions parents' concern that the localities were unsafe for play, and their preference for children to sit at home where they can help (p.44). The majority (70 percent) of children were currently at school and attended regularly, though some older children had to drop out of school for financial reasons. Sixty of the 148 (41 percent) said that garment work interferes with schoolwork. But the bigger problem was with available schools: when asked whether they would like to attend school if they had the opportunity, 120 (80 percent) answered "no" (p.38). All of these suggest possible improvements in the lives of the children, but none justify exclusion from this profitable family activity.

The Addas were different in that they entailed full-time work that usually precluded schooling; but half the children gave as their reason for working that they were not interested in studies. The hours of work in the *addas* were long and conditions often poor. Yet 14 of the 22 children described their employers as caring, and none described employers as harsh (p.36: the accompanying sketch depicts children cowering under a harsh-looking adult). Often they were working with employers from their home communities, whom they regarded as role models. All the children involved in these informal factories were learning

useful skills, and 91 percent said they would like to continue this kind of work as an adult—in an industry that was growing in Delhi. The report states:

> Many a times, children who are rescued from garment units and sent back to their families come back and re-join the units. The poor work conditions seems better than the lack of opportunity in the village. (43)

And yet such raids remain part of the project of Save the Children (p.50).

Policy appears to be determined by an abstract ideal of childhood being out of the economy and in some kind of school, rather than by what the research found about the lives of the children concerned or by what the children told the researchers. Economic activity below the age of 15 is defined as "child labour", and "child labour" is defined as harmful work, incompatible with good quality of life. There is a problem with this concept, which blinds people to the positive place such work can have in children's lives.

The work that some children are required to do can certainly be harmful and damage their development, and awareness of such harmful work has led to widespread antagonism to all children's work and the development of interventions and policies to stop child labour generally. In March 2014, Save the Children Ethiopia in conjunction with the Young Lives Research Programme[2] convened a workshop on children's work and labour in East Africa to develop evidence-based policy guidelines to serve the interests of children (Pankhurst *et al.* 2015a). Several of the research papers pointed to the difficulty of reconciling international standards against child labour with the importance of work in the lives of the children studied. To avoid further damaging children's lives, it is necessary to understand how work is integral to the lives of so many children before designing policies and interventions to protect them from harm in their work. In the next section, I take ideas raised in the Addis workshop to consider some of the benefits that children derive from work, before returning to the concept of child labour.

[2] Young Lives is a panel study of children in poverty. It took two cohorts of children in four countries, Peru, Ethiopia, India (Andhra Pradesh), and Vietnam, starting in 2001 and continuing through to 2017. It is collaboration between research and government institutions in the four study countries and the University of Oxford, where it is administered.

Benefits of work

Work is a normal childhood activity, contributing to children's development.[3] As social beings, we have evolved instinctively to participate in the activities and thinking of those among whom we live. Accordingly, children instinctively imitate activities going on around them, playfully at first, but growing in competence with practice and guidance. When children grow up in a working environment, work is one of the activities in which they instinctively participate, and from which exclusion can be stressful. This explains why children were so keen to participate in the home-based garment industry in New Delhi, and why exclusion can be damaging to relationships in the home.

Understood in this way, we can expect various kinds of work to be integral to the lives of vast numbers of children, and not merely a peripheral activity. And we can expect work to play a part in children's growth and development. I start with economic factors, not because they are the most important or the most fundamental, but because they are clear and are dominant in the minds of poor children and their families.

Economic value of work

An obvious problem with dismissing work as harmful is the need for children in severe poverty to earn their sustenance. At the workshop in Addis Ababa, Ibtisam Ibrahim (2015) expressed strong opposition to child labour as damaging children's chances to learn and develop; nevertheless, she argued that the children on the streets of Khartoum, whom she had studied, need to work. Simply to stop them from working would make life worse for them and their families. She argued rather for improving conditions of work. Similarly, Emebet Mulugeta (2015) pointed out that children working on the streets of Addis Ababa were largely driven to work by poverty and were earning for their own sustenance as well as providing for their families. In Africa, as a consequence of HIV/AIDS and war, many families are headed by children, who can rely on adults for there sustenance.

The role of children's work in dealing with poverty is now widely recognised. In Ethiopia, the work of children is key to the ability of families in poverty to absorb potentially devastating shocks (Chuta 2014). As Tatek Abebe (2015) pointed out at the workshop, this

[3] I argue this more fully in Bourdillon 2013. See also Bourdillon *et al.* 2011, 88–107.

means that we need to focus on societal structures that lie behind children's work if we are to understand and intervene constructively. Indeed, the establishment of safety nets through cash transfers has become one way of trying to reduce harmful work (De Hoop and Rosati 2013). More recently, Roy Maconachiea and Gavin Hilson (2016) argue that children's work in artisanal mining in West Africa helps to negotiate poverty and maintain schooling; they contend that an uncritical imposition of international codes, based on western notions of "progress" and development, can be damaging to children and their communities.

Apart from meeting bare necessities resulting from poverty, children in both rich and poor societies often work to acquire income to spend to improve their quality of life, or to relieve their parents of some expenses, and to begin to acquire a degree of autonomy. The issue is not simply a matter of allowing what cannot be stopped, but of understanding the benefits of safe work for children and their communities.

Psycho-social value of children's work

While economic benefits of children's work are evident, the psycho-social benefits are often more important, but are widely neglected in policy and intervention. The Young Lives panel study in Ethiopia showed that children's work, starting from a very young age, is embedded in their relations with their families, their peers, and members of their communities (Pankhurst *et al.* 2015b). Their work arises out of these relationships and the ties and responsibilities that surround them; and work helps to build and strengthen these relationships. This applies whether the work is for economic gain or simply contributing to the home: particularly in agriculture, the tasks undertaken for pay were similar to those undertaken at home, as were the conditions under which the children worked. Social relationships are known from a variety of perspectives to be important for human health and well-being; consequently, to disrupt these relationships by prohibiting work can be damaging to children.

Moreover, the Ethiopian study shows children moving gradually into work as they grow. As they become competent in some tasks, they can begin to learn new tasks. This appears a less stressful and more reliable transition to adulthood than having a particular age at which work can start. Apart from acquiring technical competencies, children learn social relations surrounding work through participation in the activities; something widely observed in ethnographic studies (see especially Bolin 2006). This learning through work means that

economic benefits of work are not merely short-term relief from crisis situations: they can also improve livelihoods in the long term.

Sometimes, learning through work is a means of entering a craft trade. At the workshop, Seleshi Zeleki (2014) described children migrating from a particular rural area to Addis Ababa for apprenticeship into the trade of hand woven cloth traditional to their home area. While there were problems with the hardship young apprentices frequently had to suffer, and particularly with the hindrance of their work to schooling, they did learn a skill and entered a trade that would provide livelihoods for at least some of them.

Nevertheless, some work can be extremely exploitative and harmful to children; while such work requires urgent intervention where it occurs, it does not cover the majority experience of working children throughout the world. Even apart from such “worst forms” of child labour, work can create problems for children, especially in combining the growing demands of schoolwork with their work in their families and communities. Yisak Tafere and Alula Pankhurst (2015) observed that it was largely left to children to manage their time and the combination of school and work; some demands of work (both unpaid work in the home and economic work) interfered with school, and some schools were inflexible in relation to other demands on their pupils’ time. Sometimes poor results at school and poor quality of schooling drove children to seek more positive experiences in work. Some children successfully combined school and work; indeed some were enabled to continue their schooling precisely through their work.

In spite of problems of combining work and school, young workers in Ethiopia frequently mentioned good feelings arising from their work, sometimes expressed as feeling ‘blessed’—by their parents and by God (Pankhurst *et al.* 2015b). More generally work can contribute to growing self-esteem. Young workers speak of feeling proud of what they achieve through work, especially when they contribute to resolving family problems (Crivello *et al.* 2012, 227–231). Working children sometimes speak of work enabling them ‘to be someone’ (Hungerland *et al.* 2007). This can be especially important for children denigrated by relative poverty or by failure at school.

Children often desire to contribute to their families and communities. When they do, so they gain status: they are recognised as responsible and gain rights as contributing members and citizens of their societies. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

(1990, article 31) demands that children develop and exercise responsibility, and the CRC indicates that education should be directed to producing responsible citizens (particularly article 29, d); work effectively encourages responsibility. By way of contrast, in many societies, children who do not work are considered "lazy".

Apart from wishing to contribute, children often wish to work for enjoyment, or for the social opportunities it offers, or for the positive experiences it provides. Where families live in an environment that includes work activities, numerous ethnographic studies show children eagerly participating in the work that is going on around them. I draw your attention to the study of Ghanaian children by Sam Okyere and Afua Twum-Danso (2014), arguing that they understood their right to participation in terms of social activities, including work, rather than in making decisions. The assumption that children are normally forced to work arises from situations in which spaces of work are separated from spaces of living and growing up and participation in work is unusual. Where work takes place in children's social space, a prohibition on participation below a certain age is social exclusion, not protection.

My argument so far is that in many African societies, and societies throughout the world, children's work – whether economic or not – is a normal human and social activity, integral to children's developing lives.

The concept of "child labour"

I have mentioned that work can go wrong for children, sometimes badly wrong. In particular, it can interfere with the schooling that is so important for them to compete in the modern world. A simple solution would be appear to distinguish "child labour", defined as work that is in some way harmful to children, from work that is benign.

There are two principle problems with this categorisation. The first is that much of children's work has potential for both benefit and harm. Our aim should be to protect the benefits while eliminating or at least mitigating the harm. Moreover benefits and harm often depend not so much on the work as on the conditions and social relations that surround it — how children are treated by adults and whether they are respected. This renders unreliable a simple classification of children's work into harmful and benign, and distracts from considerations of how conditions can be improved for children. If you divide children's

work into “child labour” to be abolished and “work” to be allowed, it is hard to consider how harmful work can be improved to retain benefits and how benign tasks can become harmful in the wrong conditions.

A second and major problem arises from the fact that the term “child labour” in practice frequently conflates two very different kinds of activity. I illustrate this problem with reference to the recent *Handbook for monitoring and evaluation of child labour in agriculture* issued a few months ago by the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO 2015). It starts with a standard definition in accordance with the UNCRC (article 32,1):

> Child labour is defined as work that impairs children’s well-being or hinders their education, development and future livelihoods. (p.12)

Later, the handbook mentions that ILO Convention 138 allows children to perform light work from the age of 13 years, and gives an example of “chicken-raising at the household level”: there is no explanation of how this relates to harmful work or why children under 13 years should not also help with a family chicken project—as usually happens in practice.

When the handbook comes to assessing child labour, it starts with age and states that thresholds are defined in international conventions (p.23). The first child labour indicator (p.32) is the incidence of working children below the minimum legal age; hazards and harm are considered only above this legal age. Below the legal age, impacts of work on children’s health and development, whether positive or negative, appear to be irrelevant. There is no suggestion that acquisition of skills and exercise in responsible behaviour should be assessed, nor indeed any benefits of work. Earlier, the handbook speaks of the “Low level of awareness of families about the harmful effects of child labour” (p.16); perhaps more significant is the low level of awareness on the part of policy makers and interveners about the *beneficial* effects of child labour.

The handbook offers no discussion of whether a legal age of employment relates to harmful work, nor any suggestion that the earlier definition of child labour has been replaced. Indeed, I know of no research that establishes correlations between harmful work and age of employment.

It is common in “child labour” discourse to define the term as harmful work, thus associating it with what must be eliminated; and then to use it to refer to age and

employment (or economic activity) without reference to harm or benefits, creating a misleading mismatch between definition and usage.[4] This is convenient for adults concerned with intervention since it absolves them of the difficult task of finding out what are the benefits and hazards of children's work in their particular contexts. But it damages the development of many children by ignoring and disrupting the benefits of work in their lives.

Minimum age of employment

This brings us to the curious history of ILO Convention 138, which demands a general minimum age for employment, not lower than the age of compulsory schooling. Marianne Dahlén (2007, chapters 4–7) has argued (I believe convincingly) that the adoption of ILO Convention 138 on a general minimum age for employment was in defiance of information in the organisation's own data base. In any case, the Convention was ratified by few developing countries for the first 20 years of its life. It was given an impetus, however, in the 1990s following article 32 of the UNCRC: section 1 states the rights of children to be protected from work that is in any way harmful or exploitative; and section 2 of the article aims to provide this protection through legislation that pays attention to age and conditions of employment rather than to harm or to exploitation. Although there are different ways of interpreting section 2, there does appear to be a mismatch between aims and practice, which has penetrated discourse and interventions on child labour with tragic results for many children. The more recent acceptance of ILO Convention 182 (1999) on the worst forms of child labour prohibits work that is harmful or hazardous in any way to all who are classified as "children" (under the age of 18). Logically the Minimum Age Convention should now be regarded as obsolete, since it adds only a prohibition of work that is not in any way harmful or hazardous.[5] Yet, and although it pays no overt attention to any rights of children, it is still widely proclaimed to be a child rights document.

The minimum age convention pays no attention to work by older children above the minimum age, and exempts unpaid domestic work and unpaid work for subsistence; so it

[4] Earlier in the Southern Childhoods workshop, Virginia Morrow used the conjuring metaphor of "smoke and mirrors" to depict how categories generated by institutions in the Global North and widely taken for granted in research, policy and practice, result in misleading perceptions when applied to such childhood situations as those covered by Young Lives research. The mismatch between definition and usage of the term "child labour" is a clear example of such "smoke and mirrors".

[5] Of the many ILO Conventions on child labour, this is the only one that does not focus the nature of the work, and whether or not it is harmful to children.

fails to protect children in these kinds of work. For example, a study in Egypt indicated that girls' attendance and performance at school were reduced precisely by domestic work in the home (Assaad *et al.* 2010). Yet, following the thinking of ILO C138, UNICEF suggests as a survey classification for "child labour" among children aged 5–11 years that during the preceding week the child did at least one hour of economic activity or at least 28 hours of domestic work;[6] there is no empirical reason either to limit economic work (such as rearing chickens) to one hour a week, nor to allow up to 28 hours of domestic work for young children at school.

Many people assume that a minimum age of employment protects children's right to schooling. Since many children take up work as a consequence of failures of the school system, stopping work is unlikely to drive these children to school. Besides, part-time work can complement as well as hinder schooling. Education should be directed to the "development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential" and the "preparation of the child for responsible life" (CRC article 29,1); these aims go beyond what most schools in the global South can provide, especially considering the value placed by many societies on communication and social skills (see Serpell 2011). Whether work hinders or complements schooling depends on many things, including conditions of work, its timing, the nature of the tasks, the nature of available schools, the situation of the children, their aptitudes, and indeed whether or not they are in school (above or below the age at which it is compulsory). The legal age of compulsory schooling, or whether or not the work is economic in nature, appears largely irrelevant to whether children derive benefits or harm from their work.

A problem with the Minimum-Age Convention lies in a concept of employment that fails to cater adequately for children's participation in family agricultural and other enterprises; Gankam Tambo (Tambo 2014, 274) points out that child domestic work outside the homes of their nuclear families can be embedded in forms of socialisation which do not easily fit into the notion of employment even while children need protection from abuse. This concept of the employment of children arises from standard employment in the industrial

[6] http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/stats_popup9.html - accessed 3 December 2015

world[7] and relates to assumptions about ideal lives for children rather than to benefits or harm in their activities.

Mismatch between aims and practice

The mismatch between aims of protecting children from harm and practice of forbidding economic activity below a certain age can be damaging to children in a variety of ways, and I list some.

It distracts attention from harmful work above the minimum age or outside economic activities.[8]

Second, it deprives children of the best jobs. Conscientious employers will not provide children with holiday or part-time jobs for fear of the stigma of employing child labour. Recently a programme in Egypt tried to remove children (aged 12–18) from hazardous work by finding them safer employment[9]: it was able to find safe work for older youths; but employers who had to meet the requirements of European buyers would not employ anyone under 15, so some younger children remained in hazardous work such as in a lead smelting plant.

The concept of child labour deprives children of the chance to learn to manage family businesses and plantations; or to learn trades through apprenticeships. The concept of child labour often leads interveners to assume that it is better for children to learn trades in formal vocational training institutions free from economic pressures than in on-the-job training, (as in the *addas* in New Delhi mentioned earlier). This assumption is contradicted by at least some evidence (Krafft 2013; Wouango 2015). Formal training institutions often fail to train children in entrepreneurship or to incorporate them into networks valuable for continuing the trade later, benefits usually provided by on-the-job training.

[7] Anthony Atkinson (2015, chapter 5) points out that "non-standard" employment is becoming increasingly common in the 21st century.

[8] Even the ILO has at last noticed that little has been achieved on reducing harmful and hazardous work above the minimum age of employment (ILO 2015), but fails to attribute this to its own emphasis on minimum-age policy.

[9] Promoting and Protecting the Interests of Children who Work (PPIC-W): http://www.ppic-work.org. The report on this "Safe Work" project is available at http://www.ppic-work.org/download/Smelters-and-Sorters.pdf; the report does not mention under-age children sometimes remaining in hazardous work, an observation conveyed to me by Richard Carothers, who was involved in the project.

Another anomaly is that younger children are sometimes denied services supporting working children on the grounds that they are not supposed to be working, leaving the most vulnerable without support (Jacquemin 2006; Muoki 2015). Children are denied protection from arbitrary and unjust dismissal—indeed, those claiming to protect children often initiate such dismissal. They are denied entry to workers' unions and the protection that this might provide. Children have even been denied the right to claim unpaid wages on the grounds that their work was not legal (Levine 2011, 267).

The discourse on abolishing child labour denigrates the efforts of children who try to improve their lives through work. My colleague, Stanford Mahati (2012) studied young migrants from Zimbabwe in Messina, a South African border town. He described a contradiction in the discourses of employees of an international child protection NGO: in certain contexts, they praised the efforts and economic initiatives of the working migrant children they were supposed to be protecting; on other occasions, they adopted the dominant discourse of their organisation that considered the place of children to be out of work and off the streets and condemned their economic efforts.

One reason for adopting the concept of child labour is pressure from international markets. At the Addis Ababa workshop on children's work, it was pointed out that around family tea plantations in Rwanda, young children could be herding animals and cutting fodder with machetes right next to the tea plantations: this is not classified as economic activity. But they should not do anything as benign as plucking tea on the actual plantation: while the children and their families regard such work as normal social activity, the US Department of Labor would classify this as "child labour" (as would the development agency the reporter was working for), and so blacklist tea from Rwanda (Bourdillon *et al.* 2015, 12–13).

The most fundamental objection to a concept of "child labour", especially when defined by economic activity below a certain age, is that it leads to interventions that hinder children from participating in their communities in a constructive way; that hinder them from learning social values and responsibility through participating in social activities, a central feature of child development in many societies; and that disrupt social relationships, which are so important for human well-being.

Priorities

What does all this mean for research on childhoods in Africa and elsewhere in the Global South? First research needs to attend to demands on children's time and energy in a rapidly changing world. Formal schooling is increasingly important to provide knowledge and skills necessary for quality of life in the modern world; time spent on schoolwork encroaches on other activities, specifically leisure and other kinds of work. Research needs to record how children adapt their use of time to the requirements of school, how guardians take account of changing demands on children, and how schools take account of other activities in children's lives.

School is not the only place of learning, especially for children with limited aptitude for schoolwork. Research can usefully attend to other places of learning in children's lives. Research on children's work should investigate what technical skills children acquire through work; but more important are the social skills and values that they learn in their work.

Psychological impacts of work are also important. Work can be demeaning and debilitating when children are treated badly (as can school); but under the right conditions, work can contribute to growing self-esteem and resilience against adversity.

The social relations surrounding work are also important, and not only the relations between children and their employers or supervisors. Children often enjoy the company of peers in work; but work also impacts on relations with other members of their families and with others in the broader world.

Certainly, researchers should look at ways children may be harmed by the work or its environment, related to the age and development of the child. Much work carries both risks and benefits, which children and their families weigh against each other, as should researchers. As in sporting activities, risk in work does not necessarily justify banning children from participating.

All this demands attention to the place of work in children's lives and its outcomes. Cultural values should be scrutinised in this light, as should the application of international standards and children's rights. Age of employment or age of compulsory schooling appear largely irrelevant.

Apart from considering the place of work in the lives of children, we need also to consider the place of children's work in in wider national and international political and economic structures. Child protection has little chance of sustainable effectiveness if it ignores (as it so often does) the social and economic structures that are damaging to children.

More generally, rights research should consider not only gaps in respect to rights in children's lives, but also assess critically the outcomes of rights-based interventions (see Hanson 2014). A critical approach to children's rights and to values that surround them is not straightforward. Literature supporting international standards is freely available, while academic critiques are not. Much funding for research and publication comes from organisations that that take international standards for granted. Any resistance to these standards is likely to be depicted as opposed to development and progress or even to morality. Funding for open research is more difficult to find.

Somehow we have to get people to think realistically about the benefits of appropriate work, against the popular discourse on "child labour". Nevertheless, there are many children involved in work that is unacceptably hazardous or harmful and work that hinders their development in a variety of ways. Sometimes, even such work is the best option available to them. This may be for reasons of poverty or lack of adult support and the need of sustenance; but it may be for other reasons, such as caring for sick adults in the family.[10] It is incumbent on researchers to explicate the place of work even in the lives of these children and possible consequences of simply prohibiting the work. Where work is deemed necessary, this can be no excuse for leaving the children without support: it is incumbent on researchers and policy makers to attend to the total context and to find the most appropriate and effective ways of relieving the situation for the children.

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[10] This is a situation that can occur in high income countries as well as low income countries, and the response should not be to stop children from caring for those in need, but to provide appropriate support. See for example Robson *et al.* 2006; Dearden and Becker 1998.

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