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Child labour and education: a case study from south-eastern Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at a system by which children contract to work for tea estates as a condition of attendance at their boarding schools. The children have very little free time and the conditions are harsh. Nevertheless, attendance at the school is by choice and the schools offer opportunities for many who would not otherwise get to school. They even offer some advantages to those children who have alternatives available. The interests of these children would not be served by simply banning this form of labour.

Introduction¹

WE ALL KNOW now that when we study a society we must not focus solely on men, who comprise only half the population. As we have criticized classical anthropologists of the past for neglecting women, perhaps the next generation of anthropologists will be criticizing us for neglecting children. Resources of families do not always reach children equally and interests of children do sometimes conflict with interests of adults. Moreover, in many situations children play a significant rôle in family livelihood and children make their own decisions, which may affect this livelihood.

The latest official figures for Zimbabwe show 43 per cent of the population to be under the age of 15 and 56 per cent to be under 20 (calculated from Central Statistics Office 1998 Table 2.3a). Around

¹ An earlier draft of this paper was presented to the Association of Anthropologists for Southern Africa in Harare, in January 1999. I am grateful to colleagues for useful comments on this occasion.

35 000 households, roughly one in 70 nation-wide, are headed by persons under 20; of these over 3000 are headed by persons under 15 (extracted from *id.* Table 5.7). Other studies suggest that these figures are underestimates: they miss households in which an older person is present but is too old or too ill to act as household head (see Foster *et al.* 1997). In any case the figures are likely to increase with AIDS taking a toll of the adult population without a significant drop in the birth rate. Yet, in planning a multi-disciplinary project on livelihoods in south-eastern Zimbabwe, it was not initially obvious to everyone that somebody should be paying attention to children.

There is a problem with paying attention to the children. When we recently had a conference on the state of children in southern Africa there was adequate representation of women, but no children were present. The nearest we got to hearing children's voices was through my quotations of children's essays. The problem is that by the time children have the necessary background to partake in academic debate, they are no longer children. Childhood is a transitory stage in the lives of us all and it ranges from the total inability and dependence of infants at one end of the spectrum to independent adulthood at the other. We have all been through childhood and assume our knowledge with hindsight supersedes their own limited understanding of the world: it is too easy for us as adults to think we know what is best for children. Yet it is important to listen to what children have to say about their lives and their needs, even if their knowledge and experience are limited. Too frequently, children are simply pushed into whatever fits adult interests.

I made a study of selected schools run by tea estates in the Chipinge District, coined *earn-and-learn*, in which pupils are provided with education, meals and boarding facilities on condition that they spend substantial time plucking tea. The pupils pay school fees and a token payment for board, and in return receive the same wage rate that adult pluckers receive. Besides paying the pupils their wages the company also spends appreciable amounts in subsidizing the schools.

I spent four weeks at one of the boarding schools for the purpose of this study, staying with one of the teachers. I talked with children, teachers, parents, past pupils and others on the estates. I visited the

homes of some of the children outside the estates. I set and marked an essay on how the children came into the system, as part of their school work. I made shorter visits to all the others schools in the scheme and also visited some of the schools in the neighbouring communal lands. I prepared a short questionnaire which students in selected classes filled in for me under my direction at both estate schools and neighbouring schools in the communal lands.²

I have presented a preliminary description of the scheme (Bourdillon forthcoming). In this article I summarize that material and add in information that I have collected since then. I shall focus specifically on the issue of child labour.

Child labour

MOST OF US think we know what child labour is and consider it intolerable. Perhaps we have in mind the sweat shops of Europe in the 19th century, where impoverished children were forced to spend most of their waking lives working for a pittance. Perhaps we have heard of child labour in Asia in which children are bonded by impoverished parents to work virtually as slaves.

A report on the Indian gemstone industry notes that in Surat children accompany working parents and start working without an official employment card at an early age: children around twelve years old were working on cutting gemstones for 12 hours a day. Once they have completed their apprenticeship they are paid on a piece rate basis, which is 60–70 per cent of the rate for adult workers. In Jipur and Trichy there are up to 30 000 children working 8–10 hours a day in cramped conditions; like adults, but receiving a fraction of what adults earn (ICFTU *et al.* 1997.) Health problems among the children in this kind of work include blistered and infected fingers, eye strain, breathing problems from the dust and back-ache. Most of

² The research was financed by the Government of the Netherlands through a grant by NUFFIC as part of a joint project on livelihood by the Agricultural University of Wageningen, the University of Zimbabwe and the Department of Agricultural Technical and Extensions Services of the Ministry of Lands and Water Development in Zimbabwe.

us agree that this is an unacceptable form of child labour, although we should recognize that alternative options need to be found for the children. We congratulate ourselves that such forms of child labour are not prevalent in our own countries in Africa.

On the other hand, we recognize that some work is an important part of children's education and socialization. Children, and specially girls, are expected to help with chores around the home from an early age and so learn household skills. Girls under ten years of age are often charged with caring for infants while their mothers work. Boys are expected to help in farm work and particularly in caring for domestic livestock. In urban areas children might be expected to help in their parents' commercial ventures, particularly in various kinds of small-scale trading. Certainly children are expected to work at school at a variety of tasks, few of which are directly productive. All such forms of child work are generally considered distinct from the intolerable forms of child labour.

The distinction is not, however, always clear. In traditional African societies the work of girls can include quite onerous chores like carrying water for the household, which can have an adverse effect on the physical development of a girl's spine. Reynolds points to the significant contribution Tonga children in Zimbabwe make towards the household economy, with girls in particular spending much of their time in work-related activities even before they are ten years old (Reynolds 1991:41-92). In some societies boys are away from home weeks at a time herding animals and living under very harsh conditions. All over the world, small-scale agriculturists can be very productive precisely because they are able to exploit family labour to work long hours at peak seasons. Even in relatively well-off urban contexts girls are sometimes expected to do hours of housework over and above all their school work, leaving little time for relaxation and recreation.

There are many cases of relatively well-off households agreeing to support the children of poorer kin. The children stay with wealthier relatives and receive food and perhaps schooling. In exchange they help with the house work. In practice this means they become virtually slaves. There are no fixed hours of duty: the child is on call twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. There is no formal job

description, so the child may be asked to do anything. The wealthier patrons acquire a very cheap form of domestic labour under the ideology that they are doing the child a favour. Such conditions are often far worse than those of formal employment, where the children are at least paid for their work. I have come across children employed from dawn to dusk seven days a week protecting crops from animals, for which they get their keep and a pittance and have no chance of any kind of schooling. Domestic child labour, both paid and unpaid, is widespread in many countries in the world, including Africa: in this form of labour, children are particularly vulnerable to various forms of abuse because of their isolation in a domestic household.³ Although some have argued that domestic labour is less exploitative than waged labour,⁴ Nieuwenhuys (1994:9, 203f) makes the point strongly that work within the family is not morally neutral.

On the other hand there are forms of formal employment from which children may benefit. Even in developed countries children may earn a little income by doing a round of delivering newspapers every day. McKechnie and Hobbs (1998b) argue that the majority of children in Britain experience paid work before they are sixteen and that this has some benefits for the children in attaining self-reliance and some economic skills. It is also common for children to perform limited household chores for payment. Many African children earn a little income from part-time, informal trading. I recall an incident in Nigeria when a small girl refused to sell her whole stock of bananas to someone who wanted to buy them. She eventually explained that she could not sit there with her friends if she had nothing to sell. Not all forms of commercial employment of children are unacceptable.

The executive director of UNICEF has tried to distinguish useful and educative forms of child work from intolerable and exploitative forms. She stated that UNICEF believes that child labour is exploitative if it involves:

- full time work at too early an age
- too many hours spent working

³ For accounts of such work see *Child Workers in Asia* 13, 1, January–March, 1997, Bangkok.

⁴ See, for example, Bequle and Boyden, 1988: 2.

- work that exerts undue physical, social or psychological stress
- work and life on the streets in bad conditions
- inadequate pay
- too much responsibility
- work that hampers access to education
- work that undermines children's dignity and self-esteem, such as slavery or bonded labour and sexual exploitation
- work that is detrimental to full social and psychological development (Bellamy 1997:3-4).^F

This is a useful starting point though it leaves many issues vague. What is too early an age? How many working hours are too many? When children work and live on the streets, who is doing the exploiting? What is too much responsibility?⁵ What does this say about work that makes possible some, even limited, education for children who would otherwise have no access to it? At what stage does stress become undue? What do we say about work that eases some of the difficulties of life on the streets? Is it types of work that damage the self-esteem of children or, rather, the imposition of middle class values on their work (I have particularly in mind sex workers, where outside attitudes can destroy the self esteem of someone who is earning a good income for the whole family)? The UNICEF criteria raise questions concerning children who are at school and certainly do not get paid for work they do. Are too many hours of school work also exploitative? How much is acceptable when the pressure and stress is for children to conform or succeed?⁶

On age, the ILO has recommended age limits of 15 for full employment, 18 for heavy work that could endanger health and 13

⁵ In several contexts I have come across the opinion that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child gives too much responsibility to children, particularly very young children, in Articles 12-16.

⁶ There have been reports of increasing suicides among Japanese children due to pressure to succeed and there have been suicides among well-off children in Harare.

for light work, though it concedes that under certain conditions these could be lowered to 14, 16 and 12, respectively. (ILO 1997: 5). Again, this is a useful guide, specially for full-time employment and employment in heavy work. But the change from childhood to adulthood is in many societies a continual process with no clear boundaries. Girls and boys may be perceived to mature at different ages. Why should there be a defining age for childhood? Children are often expected to help in the home at a much earlier age than 12. School-work also starts much earlier. Why is work for which children are remunerated so much worse?

Although work can diminish a child's performance at school (see McNeil 1984), the work experience can provide useful forms of socialization. One study in Lagos pointed out that although children in part time work had slightly lower classroom results in school, these children were over represented in leadership positions (Oloka 1991). Are we paying sufficient attention to the educative value of commercial work?

In spite of these unanswered questions, we have a list of criteria that can help us to decide whether we are prepared to tolerate a particular type of work. The next general question is: how do we respond to intolerable forms of child labour?

One of the key themes in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is that in all matters concerning children, the best interests of the children shall be paramount (Articles 3, 9, 10, 20, 21, 37 and 40), and it is clear that, in working out these best interests, the children should be heard and have a say in decisions that affect them (Article 12). There is a problem when children claim the right to work to relieve their situation, when work comes into conflict with other rights, such as the right to education and the right to relaxation and time for creative activities. We know that people under stress pay more attention to immediate needs than to long-term development and children in particular are liable to sacrifice development for immediate satisfaction. Young children do not have the experience to enable them to think realistically in the long term. There is sometimes a tension between what we as adults perceive to

be in the children's long-term interests and the children's own perceptions of their interests.

In the past I have worked with street children. The ability to earn an income is the one thing that enables them to cope with the variety of problems that face them. Their efforts are sometimes denigrated by others in society (see Richter and Swart-Kruger 1996). To deprive such children of paid labour is to disempower those children who are most deprived and most need empowerment.⁷ Studies in India, Bangladesh and Morocco (Lolichen and Ratna 1997; White 1996; Zalami 1998) have shown how the children can suffer both materially and socially when deprived of their jobs as a result of international pressure against child labour. When business people accede to such pressure they are rarely concerned about the interests of the children: rather, they are worried about maintaining sales and profits (see Durai 1997: 52). When adults take over jobs from the children, there is no guarantee that children will benefit from the extra income that the adults earn, even when their parents receive higher wages than did the children.

Rather than debate about our concepts of child labour and what forms are tolerable, it would be more profitable to turn our focus more sharply on the children in their different social contexts (see McKechnie & Hobbs 1998a 42-43). We should focus on what the work means for the children rather than how it fits in with an external categorization of childhood. Such a focus would enable us to consider what improvements are desirable and possible in their particular situations.

With respect to the *earn-and-learn* schools in south-eastern Zimbabwe my argument is that, for all their problems, the schools offer an extra option for children in need. The best interests of the children does not require a ban on such institutions. The interests of some children are served by their ability to combine schooling with earning a living. Nevertheless, there are needs that are being neglected in these schools. I have been instrumental in some

⁷ This point was made by Pamela Reynolds at the conference of the state of children in southern Africa in Harare, July 1998. See Bhebe and Mlambo, forthcoming.

improvements in the system and I shall continue to argue for further changes.

Description of the schools

THE SYSTEM OF *earn-and-learn* that has been going for over sixty years evolved out of attempts to provide adult education for farm labourers. There are two secondary schools in the scheme and four primary schools. Currently the system operates only for the final two years of primary school and the company management has decided to phase out the system at this level. Initially the scheme involved older children and young adults, but now children start schooling younger and there appears to be wide agreement that many primary children are too young to work. One of the primary schools operated without providing boarding facilities and makes fewer demands on the children than the others: here I am focusing on the boarding schools, which are larger and where demands on the children are heavy.

Any child under 13 is automatically exempted from working (though one headmaster pointed out that the income is popular and children often do not admit to being under age). Also exempted are children of company staff of sufficient rank and children with health problems. Those exempted from work do not board at the school: they are day scholars, paying normal school fees.

The secondary school I focused on had 366 children on the register in the middle of 1998, of whom 38 per cent were girls. One father managed to send his daughter elsewhere, saying that girls should not have to do such heavy work. A more likely general reason for the disproportion between boys and girls is that families are generally more protective of girls and more reluctant to allow them to stay away from home. Also girls are sometimes able to earn their school fees by keeping house for a distant relative.

The schools cater for older children who started school late or who have missed some years of schooling – often both. If children start school at the age of six, they should reach grade six at the age of 11 and form one at the age of 13. Only 16 per cent of children in the *earn-and-learn* schools are in this age range. The mean age at

entry to grade six in the primary schools is 14.2 years old and the mean age at entry to term one in the secondary schools is 15.6s year old. At entry to form one, 23 per cent are 17 years old and above (and consequently hardly deserving to be classified as "children"), with several pupils over 20. But this is not very different from schools in the neighbouring communal lands, where the average age at entry to form one was 15.5; but where only 15 per cent were 17 or older at entry into form one.

Earnings vary considerably, both according to the time of year and to the skill and enthusiasm of the individual children. Payment depends on the amount of tea plucked and the rate is the same as that paid to adult pluckers. The annual net earnings for July 1997 to June 1998 (after school fees and meals) for a haphazard sample came to around Z\$2400. The highest earnings were just under \$5000 and the lowest were \$1250. The monthly mean for plucking ranges from over \$400 in the peak season to less than \$100 in the cold season (though some of the boys earn more than this from pruning).⁸

The company provided the land on which the schools stand and the buildings and most of the equipment. They are fully electrified and the laboratories and practical rooms are better equipped than are most rural schools. The Ministry of Education provides teachers' salaries (which the company tops up for extra responsibilities) and a small allowance for each child. Government covers roughly 55 per cent of the costs of running the schools over and above fees (mostly in teachers' salaries). A company subsidy covers the remaining 45 per cent (mainly boarding costs and some ancillary staff), which works out at approximately \$1800 per year per working student. Moreover, in times of drought and in the cold season when there is little work to do, the company keeps the children and provides board, even when their plucking does not cover the normal daily charge of \$3. 50. The

⁸ At the time of the study US \$1 was equal to approximately Z\$ 20. I obtained figures for wages paid to a haphazard sample of adult contract workers who had worked 21 or more days on selected months. The average earnings were over \$800 in the peak season and if they work regularly throughout the year (including other work than plucking) they are likely to earn over \$7000.

company also provides the best students with bonded scholarships for further education.

Company officials argue that this labour is not cheap when compared with adult labour. But from the management point of view it has the advantage of being regular and reliable. They agree that in an ideal world there would be no need for such schools but, since government does not provide free education, they are able to fulfil a need in return for reliable labour. One could argue that the problems the company faces with adult labour are due to the low wages paid generally in agriculture, but that is not the issue here.

Although children come to the school from all over the country, the majority (75 per cent) have homes in the Chipinge District. In the past the schools were less discriminate in whom they admitted, but local people asked the company to give priority to people in the neighbourhood. Preference is given to those who have been to the primary schools of the company estates⁹ and many children go to pluck tea in the primary schools in order to improve their chances of admission into secondary school. In 1998 the estate primary schools increased from five streams in grade five (before the *earn-and-learn* system comes into operation) to nine streams in grade six and 13 streams in grade seven in order to accommodate the children wishing to join the scheme. On the other hand, many children of estate workers move out of the estate schools to schools in the neighbouring communal lands at grade six in order to avoid the work.

The hours are long. In the cold season children go to school in the mornings and work in the fields for up to 4½ hours a day on weekdays and they work on Saturday mornings. Then they have a study period in the evenings. In the other two terms they work in the fields from dawn to midday and then have school and study periods in the afternoon and evenings. The first term of the year was particularly heavy, when pupils worked for eight hours a day six days a week, besides all their school work. Management agreed to a reduction of hours and several improvements in their conditions, but in 1999 pupils

⁹ Seventy-two per cent of those at secondary schools had previously been to estate primary schools.

are still expected to do forty hours of plucking a week and a similar amount of time at school work. Apart from the hours, plucking can be hard work for those who are keen. They put the tea in baskets on their backs, which weigh up to 15 kilograms when full. Yet one finds the children in the fields by following the sound of happy chatter and singing. Most of them seem pretty cheerful at work when the sun is shining and not too hot.

Teachers and pupils complain of the problem of dozing when they are at school after a hard morning of plucking. It is hard enough to keep awake during the heat of summer afternoons even when children are fresh. It is virtually impossible after less than six hours of sleep and many hours in the fields.

Nobody appears to consider the issue of sleep. The company management demands hours of plucking that makes the scheme worth their while. The teachers want the children do well at school and set hours similar to those of other schools. So the children have to get up early – as is common for agricultural workers. Study cuts late into the night. Children complain of waking up tired, but blame this on the heavy work load rather than the lack of sleep.

The schools follow a curriculum that caters for an academic education. They teach some practical subjects like metalwork, agriculture, carpentry and sewing, but the teaching of these subjects is oriented towards an examination syllabus rather than the practical use of the subjects in the contexts of the home life of the children. Results at primary level in the *earn-and-learn* schools do not stand out from other schools in the district. At the secondary level results over the past three years are on a par with four of the five top schools in the district (one, Mt. Selinda, is far and away above the others): all of these are boarding schools, which are able to be more selective concerning their intake than day schools and which are able to provide better study facilities than most children have in their homes. The *earn-and-learn* schools provide better teacher accommodation than do most schools and the estates pay a responsibility allowance to teachers. This enables the estates to attract teachers and to be more selective in the appointment of teachers. But even in these schools over half the pupils fail to attain five passes in their o-level

examinations and consequently profit little from a formal academic training. They are caught up in a somewhat inflexible education bureaucracy that pays little attention to the needs of children who are not likely to perform well in any examination.

Recreation and play is limited but not entirely excluded. The school manages to fit in a little sport at weekends and during school hours: it has teams in netball, volleyball, soccer and athletics. When the school team plays against outside teams, only the players are normally released from work to attend. They have little time to practice and do not excel. There is also entertainment on Saturday evenings in the form of films or videos (supplied by the company) and events organized by the pupils. Once or twice a week time is made available for them to watch popular programmes on television.

At the Christmas school holidays the children are required to remain and work, with a two-day break at Christmas. At this time they work from 5.30 to 12.30 in the mornings and from 2.00 to 5.00 in the afternoons, with Saturday afternoons and Sundays off. This works out at a 57-hour working week. The pupils in form two and form four are allowed time free from work in October and November for their public examinations and consequently have no other holidays. The other children get a fortnight's break to go home in each of the other school holidays.

The children have access to the estate clinics. Indeed they are required to obtain certification from the clinic staff if they wish to obtain sick leave from work. But there is no routine check on the health of individual children. From accounts of both children and staff, some children grow and put on weight as a result of a better and more regular diet than they had previously.

The company can, and sometimes does, exclude children from the school on the grounds that they are not working well enough or when they miss work without proper authorization. On two of the estates, the usual practice is that the school is simply sent a list of pupils to be so punished and there is no discussion either with the pupils or the school authorities. Nevertheless, there is a system of communication, in which representatives of the pupils meet teachers and management, a system that has successfully resolved some potential

problems in recent years. The pupils have used these meetings to negotiate for improvements in their conditions.

The regime is certainly harsh. At the school I studied in detail there is a drop-out rate of around 15 per cent in a normal year (and this figure does not include pupils who leave in the first few days and never got their names on to the register). Many of the children commented that they found it extremely hard at first. In the essays several of the children said that they thought of leaving immediately in the first few days of plucking in the peak season and in the rain. Many complained of having to work in heavy rain, even in thunder and lightning. Protective clothing is inadequate: children get scratched by the tea bushes and wounds sometimes fester in hot, humid conditions. But a very common sentiment is that they become accustomed to the regime and it is not so bad. They talk of the support from other children. Dozing in class after work remains a problem but they speak of enjoying this school and of the help the school gives to so many poor children. Many past pupils commented that they were happy at the school: life was hard, but they had a goal and were achieving it.

Some children commented that the work did not seem so bad when compared to conditions at home. Several of children said that they were used to working at home and some even commented that the work here is light compared to what they had to do at home.¹⁰ At home they never had time to read: here at least they are free at the weekends. Others remarked that at home they spent several hours walking to and from school every day and the work here simply replaces that. In neighbouring communal lands I have come across children walking 14 kilometres each way to school.

The children at the school come from families in which it is taken for granted that children will share in the work and the responsibilities of the family. Young children from about ten years old are entrusted with the family wealth when they herd cattle. As we were inspecting the plot of tea of one of the parents, I jokingly remarked that his

¹⁰ For a study of children's work in another part of Zimbabwe's communal lands, see Reynolds 1991. For examples of children's work in a variety of situations, including home and informal work, see Bourdillon in press.

daughter is doing the same work at school as she did at home, only before she was working for him for nothing and now she was being paid. He replied that his children were not working for him: they have a share in the home. Nevertheless work on the estate is very different from work at home. At home you can rest a little if you are tired or unwell. On the estate there is pressure to go on, whatever the conditions and however you feel. Children say that if you get sick at the schools, it takes long to recover.

One girl described how her parents could no longer pay her fees and sent her to stay with her grandmother more than a hundred kilometres away. Her grandmother paid her school fees and she looked after the home of her grandmother. But she was dissatisfied with the schooling and the conditions there and decided to come home and then to try *earn-and-learn*.

A number of the older children at secondary schools in the communal lands earn pocket money by working on tea estates in the school holidays, at weekends and perhaps even at the beginning of term in order to earn their school fees. The headmaster of one has about 20 to 40 older children who ask for time off at month's end to go and collect their wages. At another school many claimed to pay their own school fees by picking coffee in the school holidays, while several of those who relied on adults had been sent away until the fees were paid.

There are a number of problem areas in the *earn-and-learn* schools. The hours of work are long. The children have little time for recreation and creative activities. The conditions of work are harsh. Children have little time to spend with their families. The children certainly have complaints and in the past there has been a history of strikes about a variety of issues relating to conditions at the school.

Yet in spite of such hardship most of the children choose to stay on at the schools. Many people who have been through the system speak in its favour. Parents and others express grave concern at the suggestion that the company is considering stopping this use of child labour under pressure from outside. The deputy headmaster of one school is himself a product of the system and said that people who write critical articles in the newspapers do not speak to people like

himself. "How can you say [the company] is bad? If this scheme wasn't here, where would I be?" He said other children from his area who did not join the scheme are tea-pluckers and farmers and find life very hard.

The case in favour of *earn-and-learn*

WHENEVER I discussed the school with local people, the first response was always that people went there because of poverty. If the schools were closed these children would have no education. When pupils in form four wrote a composition on how they came to the school, even the handful of day scholars invented stories of poverty forcing them out of school until they heard of the *earn-and-learn* schools. In the compositions virtually all the children spoke of the inability of their parents to pay school fees and many mentioned problems even of having enough to eat at home. The general consensus was that if government fulfilled its obligation of providing free education for all, no one would come to these schools.

Some children speak of a shortage of food, clothes and other essentials at home. Many had to leave school and "sit" at home for lack of fees. Many mentioned that their parents were not working. In some cases the father had stopped working as a result of illness, old age or some other problem. A few had lost one or both parents. According to the common perception that people are compelled to attend these schools out of poverty, I expected to find that significantly more of the children in the scheme come from parents who have either no formal employment or only unskilled employment. Indeed, if we look at the employment of the parents (Tables 1 and 2, facing page), we find a few more from the communal area schools had parents in professional employment. In both cases the majority of parents are not in formal employment. Many of these have retired, or at least have had some formal employment in the past. It appears reasonable to extend the differences in formal employment to this group, and to conclude that the children in the *earn-and-learn* system often do come from poorer homes.

In both groups the fathers of fewer than half the children were in formal employment and fewer than 10 per cent had mothers in formal employment. Many of the children recorded their parents as doing

nothing, notwithstanding my emphasis that subsistence farming is not doing nothing. I know that in some cases the parents did have plots in the communal areas, even if they were not enthusiastic about working them.

IM comes from a family in a neighbouring communal land. His father has a small plot of tea and also grows fruit and subsistence crops. His mother trades in fruit and other products from Mozambique besides working on the farm. He is the oldest of eight children and attended the local primary and secondary schools. But the tea plot is not well maintained and the houses are in a poor state of repair. He complained that he used to miss up to a month at the beginning of every term trying to raise money for school fees. He noticed that the estate school produced better examination results than the local school. So he asked his father to be allowed to transfer, and so

TABLE 1: EMPLOYMENT OF FATHER

	EARN-AND-LEARN		COMMUNAL LANDS	
	N=983	%	N=135	%
Professional	6	0.6	7	5.1
Skilled and semi-skilled	150	15.3	31	23.0
Unskilled formal employment	213	21.7	25	18.5
Self-employed in agriculture	187	19.0	19	14.1
Other self-employment	26	2.6	3	2.2
None	401	40.8	50	37.0

TABLE 2: EMPLOYMENT OF MOTHER

	EARN-AND-LEARN		COMMUNAL LANDS	
	N=978	%	N=134	%
Professional	5	0.5	2	1.5
Skilled and semi-skilled	70	7	3	2.2
Unskilled formal employment	56	5.7	6	4.5
Self-employed in agriculture	299	30.6	53	39.6
Other self-employment	93	9.5	4	3.0
None	518	53.0	66	49.3

release money for the fees of his younger brothers and sisters. He was doing well in his final year in 1998. He listed his parents as doing nothing.

Other children explained that their parents were too old or too sick to work. In some cases the parents did not have land. Whatever the exact numbers, many families had no regular income and money for school fees at the secondary level must therefore be a problem.

A number of the pupils described how they spent time just sitting at home, in some cases for several years, with little hope of anyone financing further schooling. In some cases the problem was provoked by sickness or death of a parent, or a parent losing his income and wealth for some other reason. Then they heard of these schools where you can earn your own school fees while you attend school and so were able to go back to school. Information usually came from some relative who had worked in Chipinge district. In some cases they described how they applied to the school and then had to persuade their families to allow them to attend. Several of the children commented on how their problems arose after the death of a parent, particularly the father, as the following cases illustrate:

SP is twenty years old and in grade seven in one of the estate schools. He was born in Chikore, nearby in the district and this is still his home. His father died in 1994 and his mother in 1995. They are eleven children altogether. They live with their grandfather in Chikore who has many children to look after and cannot afford school fees. One of his elder brothers has moved to Chimanimani where he has a job, but he took only his own family. The other two brothers are still looking for work. He has four older sisters who are now married. He was at school at Chikore and completed grade six there in 1995, when his mother died. There was no money to continue and he and his younger brother and two younger sisters were all just sitting at home. He came to the estate school in 1998 to continue with grade seven. Now he is paying the fees for his three younger siblings. He wants to complete his schooling as it is the only way to improve his situation.

TABLE 3: SOURCE OF SCHOOL FEES

	N=130	%
Father	53	41
Mother	32	25
Other relative	29	22
Social welfare or other agency	10	8
Other (friend)	1	1
Self	15	12
Total	(140)	(109)

Notes:

1. At one school around a quarter of the pupils had been sent away to collect their fees.
2. Eight pupils (6 per cent) listed both father and mother and are included in both categories.
3. One pupil listed mother and other relatives and is included in both categories.
4. One pupil listed both mother and self and is listed in both categories.

TABLE 4: DEATH OF PARENTS

	EARN-AND-LEARN		COMMUNAL LANDS	
	N=983	%	N=135	%
Father dead	195	19.8	32	23.7
Mother dead	88	9.0	12	8.9
Both parents dead	36	3.7	3	2.2
At least one parent dead	247	25.1	41	30.4

KS is 17 and in grade seven in one of the *earn-and-learn* schools. His home is nearby in the Chipinge District. His father died in 1990 after being sick for about five years. His mother lives at home and earns a living from weaving baskets: she has no fields. He is the oldest in the family, with three younger brothers aged 16, 10 and eight, and two sisters aged 14 and 12. The only one at school apart

from himself is the 16-year old brother, who earns money from rearing chickens for sale and so can pay his fees at a communal area school. He did grades one to five at a school in Chimanimani district. He stayed with his father's younger brother who fed him and looked after him. He earned his school fees by doing odd jobs in the holidays, like weeding fields. He came to join *earn-and-learn* in grade six.

The latter case illustrates how the *earn-and-learn* scheme is one option in a variety of coping mechanisms that children and families may try to utilize in order to earn much needed income.

I expected to find significantly more orphans in the *earn-and-learn* schools than in neighbouring schools in the communal lands. In the latter schools most children relied on parents, particularly their fathers, for their fees (Table 3). But there were as many orphans in these schools as in the *earn-and-learn* schools (Table 4). There are a variety of ways of coping with the death of parents: the *earn-and-learn* system provides an extra option for some.

More generally, it appears that the *earn-and-learn* scheme is one of several options open to the pupils who join it. I met a number of pupils who had left or were expelled and were able to continue their education elsewhere. Two girls were now walking from the estate to a school in the communal lands some six kilometres away. They said they liked the estate school and its teachers were good, but they did not like all the work. So their parents, who were in unskilled employment, agreed to pay their fees at the day school. Another lad had been forced to leave for his involvement in protests at the school. By this time the family plot of tea had become established and was producing an income, so they could now pay the fees that they could not afford a few years previously.

One factor affecting poverty is family size. The average number of siblings of the same father was 8.4 for children in *earn-and-learn*, marginally higher than the average in the day schools.¹¹ This was

¹¹ 7.5 for children in the communal area schools. For both groups the average number of siblings of the same mother was 5.6. Zimbabwe used to have a population growth rate of over 3 per cent before it was reduced by the AIDS epidemic.

never mentioned as a problem although people did comment that even low school fees become burdensome when there are many children.

Some of the pupils in the *earn-and-learn* scheme came from families who were not particularly poor. In these cases the children had opted to enter the scheme for a variety of reasons. Some of the pupils commented that they are able to help their families by attending the school. The usual practice is for the children to spend their hard-earned money on themselves. The parents regard this as the children's money and many have little idea of the amounts earned. Indeed several parents continue to support their children with gifts of food and occasional money especially in the cold season when incomes from plucking are low. The most usual context in which children talk about helping their families financially refers to the fact that they are releasing money to pay for the school fees of siblings. Nevertheless, some children contribute gifts in cash and kind to the parents. In some cases others depend on the earnings of the pupils, particularly when these are orphans.

D is a 15-year-old girl, the eldest of four children. Her parents died when she was ten. She is thankful that, because of *earn-and-learn*, she can go to school and has money besides to help her younger brothers and sisters.

This illustrates another type of household that is missed in statistics on child-headed households, namely those that are headed by an adult but depend on children for their income. In *earn-and-learn*, far from having to draw on family resources, the children can help their families.

Another attraction of the scheme is independence. Several of the children expressed pride in supporting themselves. A few mentioned the convenience of having no-one blame you if you do badly at school. It is not uncommon for parents to reprove a child, saying they are wasting their money on the child's schooling. In *earn-and-learn* such reproaches are not possible. It seems likely that in some cases the children had been taken out of school as a result of poor performance, or at least that parents had given priority to brighter siblings.

T, a 14-year-old boy, described how his parents took him out of school to herd cattle while they continued to pay school fees for his younger siblings: he is clearly a weak student, which might well explain the parents' decision.

Such children have a chance to stay on at school through *earn-and-learn*. The schools' curricula do not cater well for such students but they do provide an environment in which the students are doing something useful for themselves and can acquire a degree of self-esteem through their earnings. In such cases the classrooms may provoke more stress and humiliation than the labour.

Many children like boarding school in order to avoid close parental control. One girl with parents in Harare put this as the specific reason for being here: she likes to be at boarding school and she likes to be independent. Another girl comes from a reasonably well-off family and joined the *earn-and-learn* scheme to avoid pressure to enter an arranged marriage. She said she wanted to continue her schooling and become a teacher. Other girls mentioned the fact that some parents thought it a waste of money to educate girls. Such a decision may well be related to poverty: parents have to consider priorities in their attempt to stretch their resources. Whatever the reason, for the daughters of such parents the only way to continue schooling was through *earn-and-learn*.

A number of the pupils mentioned the attraction of the good education provided at the school. Children commented on the dedication of their teachers, remarking that the suffering of the children makes both teachers and pupils focus well on their studies when they have a chance to do so. Related to this are the attractive facilities offered by the schools: electricity for study at night, well-equipped classrooms and labs, a well-stocked library, video and cinema entertainment. Although these facilities fall well below those of the better urban schools they represent a marked improvement on what is offered in the day schools in the communal areas of Chipinge District.

Finally there is the attraction of money. Apart from being able to afford smart school uniforms and all the stationary they need, children

from impoverished homes appreciate the fashionable clothes they can buy with their earnings.

Several children, and some of the parents, mentioned the benefits of the discipline that they received at the school. There have even been rare cases of children being sent to the school from well-off homes precisely as a punishment for undisciplined behaviour. Several mentioned the motto, "Suffer now to enjoy later," as a justification for the way they had to live. Nevertheless, some parents who were happy for their elder sons to join the scheme struggled to send daughters and younger children elsewhere to save them from the hardships of working on the estates

I have shown that people consider poverty to be the main reason for joining the *earn-and-learn* scheme. Indeed, it is hard to conceive that anyone would put up the system if there were no constraints arising from poverty. I have argued that, in spite of the hardship of the scheme, the schools provide a number of attractions and some children join the scheme even though they are not strictly forced to do so through material necessity. The *earn-and-learn* schools provide an extra option for children and families who are struggling to find the means for education.

Discussion

IT WOULD be easy to condemn the *earn-and-learn* schools as part of an agricultural system that exploits unskilled labour and child labour in particular (see Grier 1994; 1995). But this does not adequately describe either the attitude of management at various levels to the schools, nor the benefits that children and their communities perceive to arise from the schools. An alternative approach is try to play the part of the dispassionate observer, who describes and refrains from any kind of judgement. I have argued elsewhere that the responsibilities of field work involve judgements and action (Bourdillon 1997). My purpose in doing the research was to have some influence on the institutions I was studying.

An international conference on Child Labour in Oslo, October 1997, comprised representatives of 39 countries, together with representatives from United Nations and other international organizations,

employers, workers (including children) and many non-governmental organizations dealing with children. They agreed that countries should progressively move towards the elimination of all child labour for children of school age, to include any activity that interferes with children's development and education. (*Agenda for action*: §2.4.). Significantly, they also resolved that in developing national programmes of action, countries should:

View the child in its social context, including his/her family and general situation, and ensure that the voices of civil society, including those of the children themselves, their families and the local community, are heard in an appropriate and meaningful way when policies are developed and actions against child labour are decided.

In an ideal world children would not have to work for their living and they would all have uninhibited access to education. Also there would be no poverty. There would be no countries in which the economies are not sufficiently developed to provide for the young and old without a contribution from them. There would be no households headed by children. But we have to cope with a world that is sadly far from such an ideal.

Besides, much of the discussion on child labour is heavily influenced by Western, middle-class ideas on childhood and education. The question remains as to how children are to grow in responsibility, especially economic responsibility and whether it is not a good thing for economic activities such as labour to be progressively introduced into their lives. In many societies children are not perceived as passively receiving their livelihood from adults: rather they are valued for their contribution to the household, currently or in the future (see Gibbs 1994:271). To prevent them from earning income is to remove their source of status in the community. There is the further point that educational systems do not cater well for all the pupils, and some children may well benefit as much from meaningful employment as they do from incomprehensible exercises in the classroom. Rothstein (1996:361-2) observed in Mexico a movement away from school and towards work, even among those who could afford school, when this was not longer seen as a means of upward mobility.

If we look at the contexts of the children, we find that for children in difficult circumstances, the *earn-and-learn* schools provide an extra option, which some of the children are happy to take advantage of. The children do not want the schools to be closed. Even those who have not managed to complete their courses in the system acknowledge that it offers something useful to those who can cope. The children would like changes and particularly a reduction of working hours (even if that would mean less money). They also want other changes and have occasionally made their feelings felt through recourse to strike action. But they want the institutions to continue.

The company that runs the schools is a public company which has to make profits for its share-holders. Its purpose is the production of tea and coffee, not to run humanitarian institutions. Like many large organizations it is prepared to run primary schools for the benefit of children of their own staff. But secondary schools require more expense and organization and to justify maintaining these schools the company needs some economic advantage. While the schools do provide reliable labour, there are alternatives, one significant one being mechanization. To demand drastic changes too suddenly would jeopardize the viability of the institutions. At the same time many in senior management positions do have a humanitarian interest in their work force generally and the school pupils particularly. And many have an interest in wider developments in the District.

The teachers are caught between the company interests and their pupils. Generally, they are concerned that the children do not have sufficient time and energy for maximum proficiency at the school work. But they need to maintain the confidence of estate management if they are to negotiate successfully on behalf of their pupils. Also they have an interest in maintaining their position at the school: although they are employed by the ministry of education the company has occasionally demanded the transfer of teachers they regard as troublesome.

We should not allow market forces to dictate the treatment of children. Society has an obligation to protect disadvantage groups, from brute market forces. Management, however, recognizes the needs of the children as a factor in calculating profits, since a healthy

and contented workforce is necessary for the smooth operation of the company. Besides, management mostly comes from middle-class backgrounds that acknowledge humanitarian values. In negotiations with management, one can appeal to humanitarian interests and to outside pressures, to bend the scales in favour of those with least power.

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