Thank you participants for sharing your valuable insights and knowledge about exploitation in the Shaking the Mover (STM) reports (Binns, Essaji, Finlay, Pearson, 2014; and Ile, Pearson, Mapara Osachoff, Morrison, 2015). Exploitation is an important issue to examine and address both in Canada and internationally. The Save the Children definition that you used in STM is helpful: “the use of children for someone else’s advantage, gratification or profit often resulting in unjust, cruel and harmful treatment of the child” (2010, cited in Binns et al., 2014, p. 3). There is a broad scope of issues but this response will specifically address your contributions in relation to child labour in order to answer the following question:

Taking into account what Shaking the Movers participants had to say about child labour and child soldiers, how can a child rights-based approach illuminate the connection between the global realities of young people and the particular experiences of individual children and young people in Canada?

I have chosen this question due to the challenge posed by the issue of child labour and the opportunity to advance child rights. The issue of child labour around a long time. My first opportunity to research this topic occurred in 1996 (definitely dating myself!), right after I began my career in child rights. It was a very black and white issue back then. More recently, the issue has resurfaced in several ways due to my study of the relationship of children and business (Collins, 2014), the important work by Michael Bourdillon and Bill Myers and colleagues (2010), and conversations with such practitioners as Richard Carothers, Olivia Lecoufle, and Kavita Ratna, and also in terms of the role of child participation in international child protection, which was the focus of an international conference last October at Ryerson University (Ryerson and ICPNC, 2015).

Consequently, I have learned that a critical dialogue is needed about this topic as your...
participation and elaborations in STM provide. This short paper offers several observations about your conclusions.

First, STM once again confirms its importance due to the lack of, or limited opportunities for young people to speak about these issues. As you describe, ignoring the issue “because it’s the easier option”; or the fact that “As sad as it is, there are people who don’t give a damn” (Binns et al., 2014, p. 13) pose significant obstacles to progress.

Further, there are strong lines established in society about what is acceptable for children to be exposed to, and engaged in and what is not. You revealed in STM that you have been “protected” from discussions about such difficult topics. As we see in the STM, young people have much to offer and to respond to in their world. But youth do not have to be protected in this way since you clearly have much to contribute and you care about humanity. As Hon. Landon Pearson highlighted, your STM involvement facilitates opportunities to explore the connections between local and global themes (Binns et al., 2014, p. 2). These connections are better appreciated because as young people, you all have rights.

As a result, the dialogue should not engage adults only in order to determine whether work is harmful and detrimental to child health and development, physically, emotionally and so on. Work is a normal part of children’s lives both in Canada and internationally but does not necessarily involve exploitation. Throughout the world, work and often identity, are part of a child’s activity; thus, research about work must include various perspectives including: “listening to children’s feelings, perceptions and views as an essential source of the evidence on the way work affects their development, especially psychosocial aspects of development. Their feelings about work, about school and about core social relationships that support or undermine their dignity and sense of security are vital indicators of hazard and harm.” (Woodhead, 1999, pp. 29-30). This observation is particularly timely in light of the Government of Canada’s (2016) recent signature of International Labour Organization’s (1973) Convention 138 about minimum ages for work. Children and youth should be involved in determining how it is implemented and respected in Canada.
Child work is a complex issue even though many in Canada feel that children should not work and only go to school. There is a tendency not to recognize the role of work in children’s lives. Focus groups with young people in Canada as part of my research identified child labour and negative assumptions about the role of work in ‘other’ children’s lives but one young person also recognized that children go to work in other countries because they do not have the choice or cannot afford education, therefore, small steps are necessary to make the situation better.¹ Similarly, you recognized the role of necessity, expressing that: “It is not really their decision because they need to make money for their families” (Binns et al., 2014, p. 13). Other study participants (aged 11 and 12) in my research also identified the need for decent work.² But these rights do not necessarily mean that you all have the same realities or understandings. Rights necessarily mean many things than one particular understanding or commitment to how things should be. But in general, as a STM British Columbia participant observed: “Exploitation comes from a place of hurt, pain, due to unmet needs; it can be defeated by providing better access to basic human needs like love, belonging, community, identity, education, health care, nourishment, and employment” (Ile, 2015, p. 11).

In Canada, work is a reality for many young people. As examples, for many in Canada, there is excitement when reaching the age of 12 and being able to become a professional babysitter; age does not have no real significance if you live on a family farm where work simply needs to be done; many young people work in retail and other service jobs at nights and weekends in order to contribute to family income, and so on. At the same time, there are problems. For example, young people have injured themselves and/or died from terrible accidents while on the job (e.g. UNICEF Innocenti and UNICEF Canada, 2009). Whether intentionally or not, exploiters in Canada and abroad should not see children and young people as “tools” who use their “vulnerability to their advantage” as you describe (Binns et al., 2014, p. 12). As Michel Chikwanine (2016), a former child soldier describes, we should never ignore the humanity of a child soldier or a refugee. The theme of power over children that you identified in STM as important is often under-explored in relation to child rights. As you described, it is “based on privileges,
experience, and socio-economic status”; “People don’t see children as people” (Binns et al., 2014, p. 12). But I also think that adults generally must better appreciate the role and power of children.

Second, your recognition of the complexity of the issue, the importance of context, and the reality and role of nuanced responses are all important as not all child rights actors and organizations appreciate these dimensions in practice. As examples, you outlined “Exploitation is a spectrum”, and not black and white (Binns et al., 2014, p. 12). You also recognized that child labour will happen as one commentator in my business study also noted (Collins, 2014). Another young person in this study, sixteen-year-old Valerie remarked: ‘I think that a business’s goal is to make as much money as it possibly can. And in developing countries, if they get the opportunity to get very cheap labour, they’ll take it and be in this dilemma, ‘oh, is it against their rights or not?’ But I think at the end of the day they just want to make as much money as possible, and that’s kind of like the challenge they might have’ (Collins, 2014, p. 602). Yet, adults and businesses often deny the existence of child workers in the chain of production (Collins, 2014). This issue of denial affects all businesses even though such denial is understood as “quite naïve” (Collins, 2014, p. 602).

You recognized that elimination of child labour as a problematic priority due to your thoughtful understanding, which contrasts with the positions of international organizations and some governments. You noted: “Governments need to come up with a solution before getting rid of child labour all together” (Binns et al., 2014, p. 13). Such comprehension was not reflected in the official efforts of the United States of American in addressing child labour. The Child Labor Deterrence Act of 1992 (United States of America, 1992), commonly known as the Harkin bill, reflected American concern about the use of child labour in Bangladesh in the early 1990s (Collins, 2014). Even though the legislation never went into force, American pressure led to the dismissal of ‘tens of thousands of child workers from Bangladesh export garment factories’ (Bourdillon et al., 2010, p. 183). Yet, these children did not return to school, turning to ‘still less appropriate’ work for children including ‘chipping bricks into aggregate, maid service,
and even prostitution’, and many were working in non-export garment factories with inferior pay, working conditions, and advancement opportunities compared to those in factories producing for export (Bourdillon et al., 2010, p. 184-5). In another example, the reaction to recent national legislation in Bolivia (2014) reveals the challenge that child labour poses to the international human rights community (Liebel, 2015). Bolivia was first country to reduce minimum age of employment to 10 years from 14 years in July 2014 following advocacy by working children including UNATSBO, which is their own organization with 15,000 working children as members who are all in school (Save the Children, n.d.). After succeeding in their battle with the national government, the Bolivian government is now dealing with the international system’s ire (e.g. Moloney, 2014). Therefore, awareness about child labour does not mean that a response is undertaken respectfully or effectively.

While child labour is commonly understood as a rights issue, short-sighted understandings and responses should not impede the implementation of children’s rights. Despite the fact that some people may disagree, the world is more complicated than child labour is wrong. In addition to the important efforts to mediate the effects of the worst forms of child exploitation, it should also be recognized that we should respect children’s right to participate and give their views as well as the role for work in children’s lives (Collins, 2016). Research and international development practice demonstrate that a supportive approach to young people who want to work is more effective than outright bans of child labour (Bourdillon et al., 2010). As one of you asked, “Why are we trying to standardize children?” (Binns et al., 2014, p. 14). This is important recognition of the realities of many children and their rights in various contexts and realities. But this challenges the common principle that human rights are universal. There is a need for context, which matters. When universal understanding restricts comprehension of issues including due weight to child perspectives, problems occur as understandings and responses to child labour reveal. Extreme poverty does not condone the worst forms of children’s exploitation or the absence of the child’s right to education, but international and community efforts can respond to the worst effects (Collins, 2014). There are some international development NGOs supporting young people who want to make their lives
and work better including Save the Children (2013) for example, that has programs that recognize the spectrum of children’s work from harmful to dignified work.

Third, your efforts led to interesting proposed solutions. Your recognition of your consumer power is significant as illustrated by such comments as "Now that I know where they're made, I’m going to try and stop buying those products”. This point mirrors what young people involved in my research focus groups concluded. This means that you are not powerless in relation to this issue. An international official also confirmed this point in relation to some emerging market countries since young people comprise more than 50% of the population. Another STM idea for companies to describe “how the products are made and by who” may be challenging for companies to respect (Binns et al., 2014, p. 13). As noted earlier, child labour is an important issue as well as one of denial and ignorance due to the huge sensitivity in the business world. But it may support a sense of competition among companies and eventually progress. One pioneering business is KUONI, an international travel company, which has a human rights statement of commitment and it has piloted the child rights impact assessment in studying their operations in Kenya, which determined that poverty worsens children’s commercial sexual exploitation. STM participants and others should continue to encourage innovative business practices to support understanding and progress.

For whatever reason, there are some issues that did not get discussed in relation to child labour that may be useful to consider. First, education is a pursuit that can be undertaken while working. Research by Woodhead involving 300 children in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, the Philippines and Central America found that 77% preferred the combination of school and work; they also recognized the benefits and direct and indirect costs of school including school fees and lost income (Collins, 2014). It is also important to note that there is a common incorrect assumption that school is always a safer place and/or that work is separated from school (Collins, 2014). For instance, China’s student or apprentice workers must do internships as part of vocational school and as a result, have become a source of labour for factories (Collins, 2014). Various businesses engage these student workers who lack the same legal protection as regular formal workers (Gallagher
and Dong, 2011). Berlan (2009) also notes that school cocoa farms in Ghana are potentially more dangerous for children than working on family farms. Second, it is valuable to note the difference between formal and informal business in relation to child labour. A formal business can pursue legal pursuits either nationally or internationally or an informal business could involve organized criminal pursuits with children as trafficking in persons for commercial sexual exploitation, illegal adoption, labour or organ removal (e.g. Gallinetti & Kassan, 2008; Martin, 2003), and so on. The informal sector also affects vast numbers of children in casual labour who are often unrecognized (ILO, n.d.). Judith Ennew (2000) describes, ignoring children’s roles reflects a limited understanding of childhood that ‘bears little relation to the lives of most children in most countries today’ (p. 16).

In conclusion, the STM ideas are “as important as everyone else’s” (Binns et al., 2014, p. 9) including in relation to child labour. Thanks so much for your excellent contributions and sharing your knowledge with the Child Rights Academic Network and others. You have demonstrated that consultation is so important to raise awareness of rights and engage in dialogue about understandings of and the realities of rights. Young people need, and the right to be involved as we consider the roles and duties of others in relation to child rights.

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Scarlett, Meaghan, Meghan, Scarlett, Annabeth and Yuki (all 12 years old), and Iris (11 years old) (all psuedonyms chosen by the young people), (Toronto focus group: October 9, 2013), cited in Collins, 2014, p. 602.

For example, Laura, 16 years old, (Toronto: August 27, 2013), in Collins (2014).
