



Child labour in Ghana: Implications for children's education and health

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Child labor
Children's health
Education
Health
Parental absence
Labor Laws

ABSTRACT

Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this study investigated child labour experiences of children in Ghana. Using a qualitative research approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with 25 participants who were purposively selected. Data collected were analyzed thematically and the findings indicated that reasons why children engaged in child labour included poverty, parental absence, and poor enforcement of educational and child labour laws. The findings further revealed that children's engagement in selling on the highway could negatively affect their health and education. Based on the findings, we recommend that there should be effective implementation of educational and child labour laws in order to mitigate this menace.

1. Introduction

Many nations, including Ghana have enacted legal instruments, such as the [Children's Act of Ghana \(1998\)](#) and the [Human Trafficking Act \(2005; \[as amended in 2010\]\)](#) just to mention a few, to criminalise child labour given its criminalization in the African Sub-region and globally. Internationally, the [Convention on the Rights of the Child – CRC \(1989\)](#) under article 32, clause 1, prohibits the exploitation of children through labour. Similar prohibition is noted by the [African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of Children \(1990\)](#) under article XV, clause 1. The criminalization of child labour; an activity that is often economical in nature is a laudable achievement as it could be on the grounds that it has been found to be detrimental to children's development and wellbeing ([Holgado et al., 2014](#)). No matter the form child labour takes, it deprives the children involved, their rights to education and healthy development, among others ([Thu Le & Homel, 2015](#)).

In Ghana, 21.8% of children between the ages of five and seventeen years are engaged in child labour with additional 14.2% involved in hazardous forms of child labour ([Ghana Statistical Service, 2014](#)). Defined as an economic activity engaged in by children, child labour is hazardous, detrimental and exploitative to children's health, development and deprives them of their education ([International Labour Organisation - ILO, 2002](#)). It adversely affects children's commitment to education in terms of school attendance, enrolment and performance ([Odonkor, 2007](#)). In rural settings of developing countries where more than 70% of the world's child labour occurs ([ILO, 2002](#)), it tends to be a moderate-intense activity that makes children part-time pupils instead of being regular at school every working day of the week ([Beegle et al., 2005](#)).

A study by [Anumaka \(2012\)](#) in the Nebbi District of North-East Uganda noted the negative impact of child labour on the academic performance of children. The study involved 2307 pupils preparing for Primary Leaving Examination (PLE) and it was found that many of the children who performed poorly were those engaged in labour. Similarly, in Brazil, [Bezerra, Kassouf and Arends-Kuenning \(2009\)](#), found that children who worked seven hours or more per day had a 10% decrease in their test scores, in comparison to students who did not engage in any kind of work. Moreover, a household survey conducted by [Heady \(2003\)](#) found a negative relationship between child labour and objective measures of reading and mathematics competence in Ghana.

In terms of health, [Porter, Blaufuss and Acheampong \(2011\)](#) noted that all the trades children engaged in on the streets required them to carry loads on their head and this adversely affected their health. Some of the negative health effects of carrying heavy loads according to [Porter et al. \(2013\)](#) are energy cost of head-loading, long-term biomechanical impacts, risk of acute injury, and physical deficiencies. Also, [Omokhodion et al. \(2005\)](#) established that the disadvantage of working as a child could lead to ill health and road traffic accidents. Children working on highways are likely to experience these health complications because they carry heavy loads for almost the period they spend each day selling on the streets.

Recognizing child labour as a global canker, some measures have been put in place internationally and nationally to lessen its intensity. The United Nations (UN), United Nations' Children's Fund (UNICEF) and ILO are some of the key international organizations that have made attempts to control the prevalence of child labour through legislative instruments, such as the CRC, Convention on Worst Forms of Child

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Labour and Slavery Convention. In July 1995 in Bangladesh for instance, UNICEF, ILO and the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association concluded an agreement to end child labour in the country's garment factories (UNICEF, 1997).

The UNICEF, ILO and the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters agreement led to the release of child workers in some of the garment factories and the allocation of stipends provided by the Association, UNICEF and ILO to enable them attend school. As of 1998, 10,500 children had been removed from factory work under the programme and about 80% were enrolled in community-based schools organized by two Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). A follow-up agreement was designed to keep these children in school beyond the age of 14 years. Furthermore, UNICEF has supported the creation of the Parliamentarian Front for the Rights of Children and Adolescents, which monitors legislations affecting children (UNICEF, 1997).

At the Regional level, Ghana joined other nations in 1999 in a 3-year ILO/IPEC -International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour- a regional project to eliminate the trafficking of children for labour purposes within the sub region. In 2000, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed by the Government of Ghana with ILO/IPEC to formulate a national policy and plan of action to combat child labour (Kukwa, 2013). All these are evidence of the nation's efforts at tackling child labour.

Given the existence of child labour despite statutory provisions, this current study investigated experiences of child labour among children who hawked on a highway in Accra, Ghana. Specifically, the study aimed to explore (a) reasons why children are engaged in child labour, (b) how child labour affects children's education and (c) how child labour affects children's health. This is important because as noted by Holgado et al. (2014), child labour is a disinvestment of social and human capital, as it compromises the development of the individual, as well as hinders the development of skills, abilities and knowledge necessary to make a significant contribution to society. Furthermore, this study is useful because many of the studies on child labour in Ghana focused on areas, such as artisanal fishing (e.g., Hamenoo and Sottie, 2015) and cocoa-growing (Nyavor, 2011).

1.1. Theoretical underpinnings

Considering that child labour is a complex issue, its explanation has to be done within a broader context. As noted by Pierik and Houwerzijl (2006), contextualizing a social phenomenon requires consideration of social, legal, economic and cultural issues. Although the issues could be discussed independently, it is important to perceive them as interactive as well (Liao & Hong, 2010). The current study is therefore approached from Bronfenbrenner's, (1979) ecological systems perspective, which perceives the environment as being made of systems that are interactive and interwoven in nature. From an ecological systems perspective, children who engage in economic activities (children selling on the highway in this context) are inseparable part of their environment. The environment according to Bronfenbrenner (1979) consists of the macro-, exo-, meso-, and micro- systems. Each of these systems can be taken as a whole with their own subsystems (Algood et al., 2011).

The macro system from an ecological systems perspective is a cultural pattern for the social structures and actions in the other system levels (Liao & Hong, 2010). It is important to emphasize specific cultural beliefs that could influence processes at the micro systems level (Algood et al., 2011). For instance, the culture of kin fostering by blood relatives could serve as an avenue for child exploitation, when its intended purpose of supporting needy children is not adhered to (Sossou & Yogtiba, 2009). In Ghana and other West African countries, many fostered children are exploited in forced labour on cocoa plantations, mines and quarries, as well as being used as beggars, street hawkers and head porters (Sossou & Yogtiba, 2009).

The exo-system is both formal and informal, and consists of relationships between two separate systems of which the child is in direct

contact with one (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Pittenger, Huit & Hansen, 2016). At the exo-system level, parenting stress and lack of parental social support are some of the factors that could influence child exploitation (Algood et al., 2011). While the Ghanaian extended family system is like a social security net that serves as a buffer to many economically deprived and children in need of care, in recent times, the role of the extended family has dwindled, due partly to a shift in social institutions, from being community oriented to being more individualistic (Kumado & Gockel, 2003). In addition, there are limited child care benefits or state support to families with children. In the absence of these social support schemes (both formal and informal) children are sometimes required to work to support households when parental efforts are not enough.

Furthermore, the meso-system is the interrelationship between at least two systems of which the child is a member (Liao & Hon, 2010). The relationship between the family and the educational system has direct impact on a child engaging in labour or being in the classroom. However, having educational policies that aim at making education accessible to all in a nation does not necessarily make it affordable to all. Many issues, including economic hardships, distance of families from schools and the cost of education, impact on families' ability to access education in Ghana (Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equality, CREATE, 2007). Though many parents desire to educate their children, they are compelled to opt for skill training instead of formal education due to their inability to support their children beyond the basic school. The practice of skill acquisition Afenyadu (2010) noted, could be exploitative in nature considering the early age at which children are exposed to harsh work conditions.

The micro system is the fundamental unit (e.g., family, school) where the child develops and consists of activities, social roles and interpersonal relationships of which the child is directly a part (Bronfenbrenner 1977). The family environment, specifically family poverty could be the main reason children engage in labour at the microsystems level (Liao & Hong, 2010). While there are child protective laws, such as the Children's Act (1998) and the Human Trafficking Act (2005) that forbid child labour, the need to survive in poor households has forced many children to work. As Pittenger, Huit and Hansen (2016) explained, the value of work and education to families [at the moment] informs their choice.

The environment (family, school etc.) in which children are nurtured is important in determining their wellbeing. Thus, child labour could be understood by considering the various systems (macro, exo, meso and micro levels) that influence children development and wellbeing. It is therefore important to give voice to children experiencing child labour in these to share their experiences.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

The study employed a qualitative design as a means of exploring and understanding child labour. Creswell (2007) noted that qualitative research approach is most suitable in finding meanings ascribed phenomenon by those who experienced it. The design was useful as it enabled the researchers to gain in-depth information about the phenomenon (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018).

2.2. Study site

The study was conducted in Pokuase in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. It is one of the major peri-urban towns in the Ga-West Municipality of the Greater Accra Region with a population of about 14,223 (50.2% males and 49.8% females, GSS, 2014). Pokuase has a low literacy rate of about 66% for males and 34% for females (GSS, 2014). The influx of immigrants has created a more diverse population with Northern immigrants living among the local Ga and Akan ethnic

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