International Journal for Early Childhood Care and Educational Research

Understanding experiences of child labour: A grounded theory perspective

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Abstract

Child labour is a global canker that plagues developing countries more with one in four children involved. Using the grounded theory design, we explore the experiences and consequences relating to educational and career aspirations of 10 purposively selected basic school students engaged in child labour activities from two Junior High Schools in fishing communities in the Cape Coast Municipality. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used to gather data. Data were then coded, analysed and a theoretical model developed describing the six components of Strauss and Corbin's (1990) paradigm model designed for grounded theory research. We found that though fishing and its related activities abound in the fishing villages, participants also engaged in farming activities such as cutting and selling thatch, and weaving and selling *kloba*.[1] Despite it being very dangerous, the *kloba* work was more lucrative sometimes than fishing activities. It also emerged that participants have little or no knowledge of the link between academic programs and their related jobs. We conclude that participants have limited exposure on various career information and choices available to them. We recommend that school counsellors and other social workers educate parents, children and significant others on the hazardous nature of child labour on pupils' education, and optimum development; and to provide career information and opportunities to these children.

[1] a kind of fence mat made from coconut branches.

Key Words: child labour, adversity, traumatic experiences, grounded theory.

Introduction

The menace of child labour today occupies an important place as a subject of concern in the public consciousness and a plaque more in developing countries (Donnellan, 2002; Ihejieto, 2020). Having recognised the enormity of the problem, the Government of Ghana became the first African country in 1990 to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Articles 87 and 88 of The Children's Act of Ghana (1998) clearly stated that "No person shall engage a child in exploitative labour" and that "Labour is exploitative of a child if it deprives the child of its health, education and development" (p. 27). The laws of Ghana, therefore, prohibit child labour.

Child labour in insolvent fishing communities is used as coping mechanism to reduce poverty that, ironically, only seems to perpetuate the poverty cycle of the people where the type and level of education determines one's career placement. The significance of the fishing sector in research is due to the high incidence of child labour activities recorded in the field by newspaper reports and several researchers (Agordzo, 2011; Golo, 2005). By 2018, 22% of children aged five to eleven years in Ghana, were already involved in economic activities for 43 hours or more a week. Additionally, 11% of children aged 12 to 14 years were doing household chores for 28 hours or more weekly, while 29% of children aged 15 to 17 years were working under hazardous conditions (Donkor, Donkor, Twerefoo, Lee, Akotey & Boateng, 2023).

Anker and Melkas (1996) defined child labour as encompassing monetary and unpaid activities which are mentally, physically, socially and morally hazardous to the child and that make schooling impossible. George (1979) viewed the problem of child labour from the sociological point of view. He believed that social conditionings which contribute to the occurrence of child labour are because of unsuccessful efforts to legitimately achieve societal goals. We therefore conceptualize child labour as paid and or unpaid activities carried on both inside and outside

the family or naturally occurring jobs performed outside direct family control by persons who are still in basic school and have not reached their minimum statutory school leaving age, and that the said activities place too much responsibility on child and delay their entry and exit from basic school and causing them psychological distress.

Traditionally, fishing has been one major occupation in Ghana and an important economic activity that accounts for about five percent of agricultural Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Jonny-Nuekpe (2023) reports that about three million Ghanaians are directly involved in the fishing sector (representing about 10% of the workforce) and that the sector is bedeviled with incidents of child labour, forced labour-related tendencies and child exploitation. Data from Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Development (MoFAD) indicates that over 1.23 million children (14.2 %) of Ghana's child population is in hazardous child labour and child-trafficking situations and over 50,000 of these children are involved in fishing (Jonny-Nuekpe (2023). According to research findings of the DANIDA/DFID (2004) and FAO (2002), the fishing sector has a large scale of unskilled labour employment. This is due to poverty and the nature of the sector which is labour intensive. The need for more hands coupled with lack of or little capital base, compels fishermen to resort to labour that is less expensive and at the same time, helps sustain the work. The most available source of cheap labour then is child labour.

The existing literature seems focused on the numerical dimension of the problem rather than an approach that could get to the core of the problem: *to see, feel* and *understand* child labour as it *is* experienced by the participants themselves. We, therefore, sought to explore the lived experiences of children engaged in child labour, and the critical consequences of child labour on their education and career aspirations through a grounded theory model. Two research questions were used to guide the study: (1) What is the nature of the child labour experiences that child labourers in basic schools in fishing communities in the Cape Coast Metropolis

report? (2) How does child labour affect the educational and career aspirations of child labourers?

Methodology

The tradition of enquiry in this study is the grounded theory design of the qualitative approach in data collection and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The qualitative approach is particularly suited to uncovering meanings that people assigned to their life experiences in their natural settings. Ten research participants from two JHSs who engage in child labour were selected through snowball and theoretical sampling procedures. The semi-structured interview guide and focus discussions guide were used as data collection instruments. After each individual interview, two focus group discissions were held with participants. During these sessions, questions relating to participants' experiences in child labour and how these affect their educational activities and career aspirations were asked. Sessions were recorded with audiotapes and hand-written notes. Seven parents, teachers, and immediate neighbours were interviewed to facilitate the triangulation process.

The grounded theory design was used to (a) develop codes, categories, and themes, (b) analyse narratives of participants' experiences of child labour and its resultant effects on them. The study employed the open, axial, and selective coding procedures together with the paradigm model developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) for grounded theory to analyse and represent data. To reduce bias and establish verification (Padgett, 1998), member checking, triangulation, and prolonged engagement were employed. The two schools have similar characteristics such as languages, culture, fishing activities, among others. Both formal and informal informed consent of the parents, teachers and participants were duly sought and received. Table 1: presents summary of participants' demographics.

Table 1: Summary of Participants' Demographic Data

Pseudonym Name	Gender	Age At onset and now	Form	Residential Status
Agbee	M	10/19	3	Own
Ericus	M	12/18	2	Mother
Inno	F	9/15	1	Care Giver
Chris	M	13/18	1	Both Parents
Dzidzor	F	10/15	1	Care Giver
Josh	M	10/19	3	Care Giver
Dan	M	12/18	3	Mother
Tsoeke	F	Not known/16	3	Mother
Eleanor	F	12/16	1	Care Giver
Prince	M	14/19	2	Mother

Source: Field data

Results and Discussion

According to Table 1, four females and six males giving a total of 10 participants were in this study. Participants' age at onset ranged between 9 to 14 years old, while one could not tell the age at the onset of child labour. The current age range was 15-19 years. On the duration, participants spent from 5 – 9 years in child labour. Four participants were in Form One, two participants in Form Two, and four in Form Three. Living contexts of participants ranged from living with their biological mothers, both parents, and caregivers to living on their own.

The paradigm model presented in Figure 1 below is developed from the present interrogation of the experiences and consequences of child labour on pupils. The research questions have been used with the tenets of Strauss and Corbin's (1990) framework for grounded theory research. In this case, Research Question One is linked with the Causal Conditions, the Phenomenon, the Context, the Intervening Conditions, and the Strategies. Research Question Two links up with Consequences of the Phenomenon.

This theoretical model helped to fashion all the elements of the processes of child labour driving through the causal conditions to the phenomenon which is linked with the context. The intervening conditions joined the coping strategies that were further linked with the outcome. The context, just as the phenomenon, is impacted on the outcome.

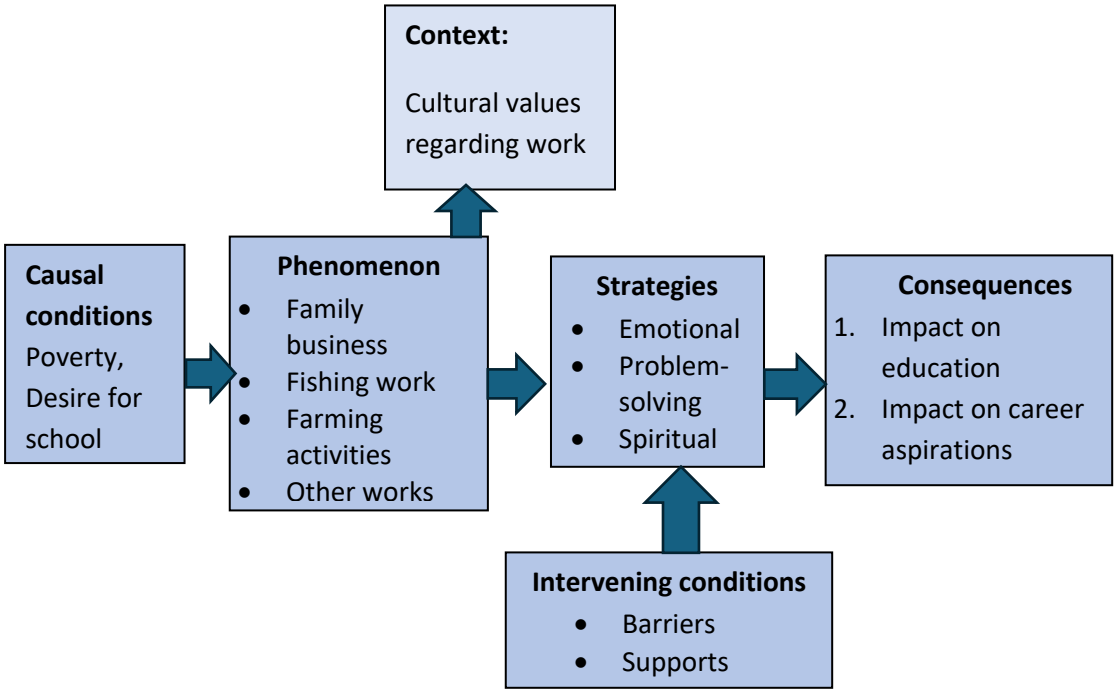

Figure 1: Emergent Theoretical Model of the Study: Author Construct (2024)

This process involved clustering focused codes together under overarching conceptual descriptions, to begin to capture what was happening in the data. All the focused codes were printed out and physically organized and reorganized as relationships were established. In some instances, a name was created to summarize a theoretical explanation of the data. In other cases, existing codes were already able to shed light on key processes and were then promoted to category/subcategory status. Categorization was then done to focus codes that were synthesized into provisional categories and subcategories. The results are therefore presented in the format of the paradigm model for grounded theory studies under two major categories and their subcategories.

Category One: Nature of child labour experiences of school children in fishing communities

This category is presented under various subcategories such as causal conditions of phenomena related to child labour, context within which child labour activities and coping strategies developed, intervening conditions influencing child labour, and strategies resulting from the phenomenon.

Causal Conditions of Phenomena Related to Child Labour

In exploring the factors responsible for the phenomenon of child labour, two causal conditions emerged as shown in Figure 1 above. These are: poverty and desire to have formal education. Poverty is a factor which to all appearances pushed children in fishing communities into child labour. Participants indicated that but for poverty, they might not have found themselves working. One participant, Agbee, intimated that he might not have engaged in child labour if his mother was gainfully employed. Dan's mother echoed this sentiment: "*...the problem for us is that ... we don't have any good job to do and so we have nothing".* In a sense therefore, poverty is a direct factor of the participants' involvement in child labour.

The desire to have formal education emerged as another strong factor underpinning children's involvement in child labour and this has 'pushed' as many as seven out of the 10 participants into child labour to either start school or stay in school. At the age of 10 years, Agbee felt that he was missing something. It dawned on him that formal education is very important in one's life. He said, "*... before I started working, I was not going to school because my father is not looking after me".* Josh also reported that the desire to continue his education after the parents divorced and his father did not provide for his needs made him to start work. The implication is that though the desire to be in school is a direct cause of child labour as reported by participants in this study, the underlying causes are poverty and neglect.

Phenomena Resulting from the Causal Conditions of Child Labour

As participants shared their 'lived' experiences by virtue of their status as child labourers, the phenomena that result from the causes of poverty and desire to have formal education in Figure 1 were discussed. The works they do to alleviate their poverty and to put themselves and some of their siblings in school were defined as the phenomenon. In examining the nature of child labour as reported by participants, the various types of work the participants engage in were looked at. The types of work they do were coded and categorised into four main groups: *family business, fishing work, farming activities,* and *others.* As indicated in Figure 1, all these categories are due to the causal conditions and are directed towards some strategies.

Family Business (Petty Trading): Family business is a business owned by parents or caregivers in generating family income in which children perform several tasks depending on the nature of the business. This income is used in supporting the family and taking care of the children's education. These businesses ranged from selling provisions, smoking fish, processing gari, to preparing and selling cooked food. Participants who took part in these family businesses reported that though they helped their parents in doing their businesses. Ericus reported, "... *because my mother processes gari, I peel, wash, load the cassava to the mill, and fry gari…".* Dan in like manner revealed that "*sometimes I sell kaklo*[1] *for my mother...".*

The heavy load placed upon these children leaves them little or no time to rest or play and they have no time to study at home and do their homework. This adversely affects their academic performance. This finding is supported by Donnellan (2002) and UNICEF (1997) that many young children are not directly pushed into child labour but loaned to relatives who give vain promises to take very good care of their personal and educational needs.

Fishing Work: Fishing work is another phenomenon resulting from the causal conditions identified in Figure 1. The fishing activities included rowing boat, scooping water from the canoe, diving into water to disentangle and set nets, mending net, catching crab, fencing, sorting fish, carrying fish and smoking fish. Agbee, Chris and Josh reported that they "*pull the*

net, and carry the fish, prepare the fish, and carry the dirty net and the rope to the fishing village". As for Ericus, though he did not go fishing, he reported, "*I also catch crab and sell".* Thus, participants predominantly engaged in fishing and related activities to help their caregivers or to make money for themselves and these activities mostly took them out of school and did not allow them to learn at home or do their homework. This finding resonates with DANIDA/DFID (2004) and FAO (2002) that the fishing sector has a large scale of unskilled labour employment which is due to poverty and the labour-intensive nature of the sector.

Farming work: The fishing communities are not farming villages per say but some amount of farming work goes on there. Some participants reported that they engaged in some farming activities to earn money. These activities include weeding, cutting thatch, and weaving *kloba*[1] Ericus said, "*I don't go fishing instead I pluck coconuts from my grandfather's coconut trees and sell".* Dan corroborated this: "*Sometimes too I go to my grandfather's coconut trees to cut the branches and weave kloba to sell".* In the fishing villages, child labourers do not engage only in fishing activities but rely on farming work to supplement their fishing work. This phenomenon comes in handy especially when fish is scarce.

Other Works: Yet other phenomena that resulted from the causal conditions were activities such as carrying concrete at construction sites, carrying load (head portering), and washing for a fee. The data revealed that all six male participants did not engage in one economic activity to make money. They engaged in two or more income-earning activities: Chris for instance, indulged in fishing activities but did not cut thatch. Instead, he carried load and washed for university students. And Dan did not do fishing work but was involved in family business and other economic activities such as carrying load, carrying concrete at building sites, and weaving *kloba.*

Context in Which Child Labour Activities and Coping Strategies Developed

Figure 1 shows that, participants carried out their child labour activities in the context where society views the work of a child as a means of training and socialisation. Participants reported that they started work in the domestic settings by helping their families before going out for paid jobs. These children worked partly because of poverty but also because cultural values and expectations support this as a natural and right way to bringing up children and training them to take up roles and responsibilities in adult life. In fact, this is the traditional mode of instilling informal education and socialization amongst the study people. This research revealed that participants helped their parents in their small home-based businesses. Inno, Eleanor and Dzidzor worked for their caregivers. Tsoeke worked for her own mother. Dan and Ericus engaged in economic activities to earn money but who also helped their mothers in their small home-based businesses. Ericus said:

> *"...because my mother processes gari, I peel, wash, and load the cassava to the mill and fry gari... I go and look for firewood for the fire too".*

All these point to the issue of children engaging in work early in life as a means of helping their parents and or as a way of being trained and prepared for adulthood responsibilities. Tsoeke's biological mother pointed out that the work she made her daughter do was to train her so that she can be on her own when she grows up. She intimated:

> *You see, if I don't insist that she does every work, she will become lazy in future and if she does not get any good man to look after her, what will she do then?*

In general, community members together with some parents, teachers, and neighbours believe that involving children at very young age in work is not a new concept within their traditional cultural practices. For some parents, child work is a means of training for future life.

Intervening Conditions Influencing Child Labour

In Figure 1, the intervening conditions were coded as *support* (conditions that help to facilitate child labour practices) and *barriers* (conditions that prevent or constrain the performance of child labour). Intervening conditions coded supports and barriers are social-based categorized

as *change in relationship with significant others.* Supportive relationships emerged from significant others like mothers and siblings. Other extended family members put impediments on the way as participants struggled to carry out their work. Relationships with friends and school authorities were, however, both positive and negative.

Supports: Participants indicated that their relationship with their mothers while they engaged in child labour was cordial. They reported that their mothers were understanding and supportive of their conditions. They reported their mothers were their confidants and source of comfort. Dan reported, "*My mother understands my situation and talks kindly to me and that is why I continue to support her with the little I make"*. The relationship with siblings is said to be positive. Participants believed that the moral support received from their siblings enhanced the performance of their work as child labourers.

Barriers: One major constraint has to do with participants' relationship with other family members. Nine participants reported that they were not happy with the kind of treatment they received because they work as children. Relationship with school authorities was both positive and negative. Majority of participants reported cordial relationship with empathic understanding from some teachers. Teachers were generally reported to be supportive both financially and emotionally. Some teachers encouraged the participants in the face of their seemingly difficult situations and gave them hope for the future. They were of the view that their teachers' constant check on them had kept some of them who could have dropped out, in school. Just like the relationship with school authorities, relationship with friends was both facilitative and constraining. While some friends helped students who work to manage their situations to stay in school and concentrate on their lessons, majority frustrated them through verbal abuse and isolation. Overall, relationship with friends placed an emotional barrier on the efforts made by participants to cope with their situations as child labourers and to perform well in school.

Strategies Resulting from the Phenomenon

The coping skills that participants employed to meet their situations as shown in Figure 1, were coded *emotion-focused skills, problem-solving skills* and *spiritually-managed skills.* Participants who used emotion-focused strategies used *displacement*. Some participants used a kind of displacement known as "turning against the self" to deal with the overwhelming stress placed upon them in their attempt to better their lot in life. Instead of directing their anger or inabilities onto the elements in the environment such as parents, and external family members who have impoverished them, they turned against themselves with feelings of bitterness, inferiority, anger, self-pity, and guilt. Participants who used problem-solving strategies resorted to actions such as planning to return to their biological parent(s) or were determined to continue to work and at the same time, study hard so that they and their nuclear family would be better off in future. Participants with spiritual-managed skills sought divine intervention to their plight by praying constantly either on their own or with the help of men of God. They tend to surrender under the banner of God and resign to their fate in the hope that the will of God be done in their lives.

Category Two: Effects of child labour on the educational and career aspirations of child labourers *(Consequences of Phenomenon for Child Labourers)*

The consequences of the phenomenon for child labourers as shown in Figure 1, were coded *impact on education* and *impact on career aspirations*. There is a clear indication from the responses that child labour adversely impacts both education and career aspirations of child labourers.

Impact on Education: The outcome of child labour on participants were subcategorised as *missing lessons, lack of concentration during lessons in class,* and *poor study habits.*

Missing Lesson: One needs time to attend school in the morning and study at home in the evening. This proposition was stated by Dzidzor, a 15-year-old Form 1 girl living with a caregiver:

> *My main problem is that learning at home after school is a problem because every evening after doing everything at home I've to go and sell kerosene on the street and by the time I come home, it's late and I go to sleep. I need time to learn at home after school.*

Looking at the circumstances under which child labourers in fishing communities find themselves, one of the difficult things is for a child labourer to get adequate time during the day to study. Agbee said, "*All depends on whether I have some money ... otherwise I have to leave studies and go to work"*. Torn between the choice of devoting time to studies and working to earn money, Agbee, just like the others reported, prefers working to studies. What he did was to "*look*" (glance) through his books "*small"* that was perfunctorily (inadequately) before going to school or sometimes decided to ignore studies completely to work. This implies that their performance may be better if child labour is taken out making room for more time for studies.

Irregular School Attendance: Child labour accounts for a large part of absenteeism of the participants. Due to work, the participants did not go to school always and or were habitual late comers. Josh captured the moment by recounting, "…*and sometimes I don't come to school for a whole week"* and Inno intimated, *"I get to school late mostly because I had to work before coming to school"*. Chris reported that "*Sometimes because of work, I don't go to school especially on the days of bumper harvest..."*. The girls on the other hand though they went to school regularly, they were notorious habitual late comers.

Lack of Concentration in class: Child labourers are also largely affected by lack of concentration in class. Due to work related issues such as fatigue and lack of money, participants suffered lack of concentration in class. Ericus intimated, *"In class when they are teaching my mind goes far away thinking about my life"*. This seems a major academic problem

to him looking at the frequent times he, spoke of it, "*Sometimes my mind goes far from the class*", he said in a group discussion. Tsoeke also recalled that "*Sometimes my mind goes far away even in class thinking about why my mother treats me the way she does".* This absentmindedness is a factor of lack of concentration which results from work and consequently leads to poor performance in class.

Poor Study Habits: Many students who work reported having poor study habits. They did not often pay attention in school, they did not go over their notes at home, and did not have enough hours of studies. "*I look into my book small before I get ready for school*", (fleetingly) reported by Agbee. Chris revealed that, "*I don't do my corrections after an exercise... My problem is that I don't have enough time to learn...".* In fact, participants did not even copy notes on lessons they had missed when they come to school.

Over-Aged Students: The average age for entering primary one in Ghana is 6/7 years. However, late entry into school of children in the study sites seems to be the norm rather than the exception. Some of the participants entered school, (Primary One) as late as age 10 as in the case of Agbee. Others had their education disrupted or repeated a class often because of work. All the participants were still in JHS between the ages of 15 and 19 years whereas by the structures of Ghanaian school curriculum in terms of age and class levels, those 16 years and above should have completed JHS and in some cases, be in SHS. This is where child labour is both a cause and a consequence. A cause because, it prevents children from going to school early and in some cases, making them repeat a class.

Impact of child labour on Career Aspirations

Majority of the participants have plans of becoming great men and women in future. They believed that if they were given sponsorship or taken out of their current predicament, they could do well in school today to become very important people such as bankers, nurses, and mechanics. Though Agbee suffers as a child labourer, he has high educational and career

aspirations. He believes that he engaged in work to send himself to school and having done that he believes he must go high on the educational ladder by getting to the university and landing himself a good job in future; a job that will take him and his mother out of the shackles of poverty. He declared:

> *I wish to go to school to the highest level ...to varsity, I want to be a mechanic, a big man, madam (referring to the researcher)… This has been my dream from childhood so even when I sleep, I dream of this work.*

The aspirations of Josh were not different. He reported, "*It is my intention to reach the university level and become an auto mechanic this has been my heart desire".* Chris reported that he will be a musician in future and that his parents were aware of his talent and ambitions and were happy for him. Dzidzor was however not sure of what the future holds for her. She said, "*As it is now, I don't know what I will be in the future".*

All participants have a desire to pursue higher education right up to the university and seem to understand the role education can play in improving their poor socio-economic status. However, some male-participants reported that they would like to become mechanics or musicians, and the others were uncertain of what they would become. These reports indicate that the career awareness of the participants is limited and influenced by what exists in the environment where being a mechanic is more prestigious than being a fisherman. They, therefore, do not know and cannot think of other career opportunities that are available to them upon completion of their senior high school or university education to pursue courses that would lead to different career choices and placements.

Conclusions

We conclude that the phenomenon of child labour experiences varies ranging from fishing work, family business, farming activities to other works. It is evident that educationally, participants were affected negatively because of child labour. Child labourers do not have proper study habits such as copying notes and reading over their notes. They also lacked

concentration in class and absented themselves from school often. On career aspirations, participants have limited exposure on various career information and choices available and were therefore, looking up to or matching their dream careers to what exists in the community.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that school counsellors and other social workers should carry out psychoeducational activities for parents, children and significant others, to increase their awareness level about the long-term effects of child labour on the individual child, family, and society.

It would be helpful to the process of child labour reduction and plausible elimination if Guidance coordinators could assist all students especially those in fishing communities with the necessary career information to broaden students' horizon on different career choices they can make.

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