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CREATING LIVELIHOODS THROUGH 'BRASSBANDSHIP' IN GHANA

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Abstract

The study uncovers the enormous benefits derived from learning to play brass or other instruments in a brass band in Ghana. It demystifies myths and untruths speculated around the playing of brass instruments and membership of brass bands in Ghana. Using a qualitative descriptive case study approach, the study collected data through participant observation, interview, and focus group discussion involving youth brass instrumentalists, security service bandsmen (men and women) bandmasters, and recruitment officers. The study reveals how members of school, church, and community brass bands have benefited and are making livelihoods from the skills learnt on the instrument and membership of the band in general. It concludes that beyond the academic endeavours by the youth of communities in Ghana, brass instrument learning and good play creates more opportunities and provide livelihood for as many as desire to pursue as a career. It therefore recommends to stakeholders to take interest in the formation of such bands for the youth, encourage them to learn, and be members of such bands as they contribute in developing the human capital and grow the brass band culture in the creative arts sector.

Keywords: *brass band, youth employment, informal music training, musical skills, livelihood*

1. Introduction

Brass instrument playing and membership in brass bands have been one of the long-standing traditions in Ghana, tracing their roots to the arrival of the colonial masters in the Gold Coast era (Maclean, 2018). The formation of brass bands in churches by the missionaries as a conduit for the propagation of the gospel as well as their use in schools established by same have continued as a tradition to date (Dordzro, 2020). The colonial army and their use of military band instruments for marching and evening entertainments also influenced the formation of community brass bands, starting from the coastal areas in Ghana and spreading to other parts of the country (Rumbolz, 2000). From their inception, brass bands in Ghana, the instruments involved, and membership have, erroneously, been perceived as musical groups for alcohol lovers, ruffians, miscreants (Green, 2012). Several health issues have been thought of by many

as being likely to affect players of core instruments in the brass band. Health conditions that affect both men and women, to the extent that women have even been perceived as not being able to conceive if they play such instruments (Guénault et al., 2025). To date, no medical evidence has proven any of the perceptions to be true or founded.

Many churches have bought brass instruments and encouraged their members to learn and perform on the instruments for the church's activities, especially street processions and other religious and social functions involving church members. Some churches allow people outside the church to engage the services of their brass bands at a fee for the maintenance of the instruments and refreshment of the players in the band. For churches that have paramilitary organisations like the Boys' and Girls' Brigade in the Methodist, Presbyterian, Anglican, and African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Zion churches, the Christian Youth Organisation (C.Y.O.) in the Roman Catholic churches, the Adventist Youth Ministry (A.Y.M.) in the Seventh-Day Adventist church, and the Salvation Army Church, the establishment or formation of brass bands for the groups mentioned is a common practice. Since these groups' activities involve marching and other military drills, the brass bands are mainly used to provide music during such activities.

Basic and Senior High Schools in Ghana have also taken an interest in the formation of brass bands in the schools as part of the co-curricular activities or training for learners. For basic schools, – Primary and Junior High – it has been the private-owned schools which are able to acquire and form such bands while the acquisition of such instruments in public senior high schools has been through the use of internally-generated funds, donation of instruments by old students, donation of instruments by parents to the school or provision for their wards in the band. The modes of acquisition of instruments, as described, are as a result of the failure of government or the Ministry of Education to provide such instruments for its established schools. Thus, for public basic and senior high schools that are unable to get donors to provide such instruments, learners are denied of such training and skills on brass instruments in the school. Similar to how brass bands are used by the churches, schools that have such bands also provide music for marching and military drills for their cadet corps as well as perform for street processions by the school, when necessary, at sport events and other programmes by the school. Seldom, schools that do not have such bands solicit assistance from those that are privileged to have such, by way of invitation, to provide some of the services mentioned. These invitations allow the members of the band to travel to places far and near as a way of touring within and outside the municipality and sometimes the region where the school situates.

Outside the churches and the schools are private or community-owned brass bands often classified as community brass bands because of their openness to the public to join as members and also their availability to the general public to perform at any function where their services are required. In some of these bands, members in the church and school bands may also opt to join to afford them more practice and performance opportunities. Thus, the community brass bands become avenues for school and church bandsmen to enhance their playing skills. Repertoire for these bands encompass, virtually, all genres though predominantly Ghanaian slow and fast highlife, and contemporary afrobeat and hiplife. As earlier hinted, these bands can be engaged and are available for all kinds of programmes – funeral processions, funeral rites, birthday parties, street processions, gospel crusades, political party processions and rallies, programme launches, national events like Independence Day celebration parades and May Day celebrations.

The desire of the youth to join any of the bands discussed sometimes comes with resistance from parents who often think that membership in such bands can be a distraction to the academic work of their wards. A study by Dordzro (2020) indicates that in Ghana, only a small

number of musicians can make a living solely from music. Brass bands often operate on the margins, and members commonly have other jobs. Quite more disturbing is the obliviousness on the part of stakeholders – parents, educational institution heads, and government – to the enormous benefits that the skills acquired on such instruments eventually bring to those who can learn and play.

One of the major socio-economic challenges that Ghana faces, as a developing country, is youth unemployment. Partly for this reason, in several communities in Ghana, poverty is a bane to many families and without any intervention, poverty becomes a cycle without end. In government's bid to provide skills training for the youth in order for them to get employed by institutions, industries or create their own businesses, Technical and Vocational Training institutes have been established across Ghana to train students with such preference to the regular senior high school programme. Among the trades often taught at these vocational institutions have been plumbing, masonry, carpentry, automotive engineering, etc. However, one very lucrative skill that has received very minute recognition from stakeholders – policy makers, parents, community leaders, etc. – is that of music and other performing arts which have become viable sources of livelihood for many a youth. Though the participation in brass band music training and performance from schools, churches and communities has facilitated the recruitment of many youths into the nation's forces and security services, academic research that examines the contribution of the musical skills gained from brass bands for employment opportunities or recruitment is quite scanty. There is, thus, a gap created in understanding the socio-economic role of brass band formation, participation, and music in Ghana. The use of the skills acquired through brass band participation as pathways into the security service bands in Ghana is, therefore, what this study seeks to investigate.

2. Review of Related Literature and Frameworks

2.1 Related Literature

To date, studies providing information that specifically describe how members of brass bands in Ghana have benefited from the skills learnt on their instruments by way of providing livelihood for them remain scanty. However, studies have been conducted that portray the benefits that can be obtained from learning such skills. A study by Weston (2020) on the value of soft skills in popular music education in nurturing musical livelihoods revealed the understanding graduates of an Australian popular music degree had on the value of soft skills to their employability and musical livelihoods. Weston defined soft skills, in the study, as interpersonal and intrapersonal transferrable skills such as effective collaboration and communication as opposed to the hard skills related to the technical requirements of a specific task. The present study, however, considers skills that are learnt as pastime but eventually become a conduit for earning them careers and hence, a livelihood. Students, while reading various subjects to pursue particular courses for desired careers or professions, may use skills acquired from co-curricula activities in their schools, either as aid to earn selection or as main prerequisite for employment.

Studies have also established that learning to play a musical instrument is an activity with cognitive and academic benefits (Román-Caballero et al., 2021; Azizinezhad et al., 2013; Scripp, 2002). Whilst these studies reveal benefits which include the ability to transfer music learning skills to other subjects or disciplines, others also evince emotional skills acquired from learning music (Campayo–Muñoz & Cabedo–Mas, 2017; Chung, 2010). According to Chung (2010), a child who enrolls in music lessons does not only embark upon a wondrous musical adventure,

but also gains a wealth of skills that go far beyond the musical notes. He outlines these to include learning to work hard, learning to be self-reliant, learning to be responsible, learning to focus, learning to pay attention to details, learning to be creative, and learning to persevere. These are outcomes of music making that can lead to success in life for anyone. Chung posits that when employers consider candidates for their top positions, they usually look for a well-defined set of character traits. Specifically, they want people who know how to work hard, are self-reliant and responsible, can focus well and avoid distractions, will pay attention to details, are creative, and will persevere on a project from beginning to end (Chung, 2010).

This study also considers how the youth in communities in Ghana use the skills they acquire from brass instruments learning and playing from school, church or the community, albeit through informal training. It however sides with the assertion by Nelson (2023) that formal training in a musical instrument is a powerful catalyst for enhancing performance quality, it empowers musicians with technical prowess, interpretive depth, stage presence, and the ability to manage performance-related anxieties. Nelson opines that formal training serves as the bedrock upon which musicians build their technical skills, artistic interpretation, stage presence, and overall confidence. Indeed, one recommendation from the study of Nelson (2023) which encourages aspiring musicians to commit to formal training with a qualified instructor or through reputable music institutions is what is eventually seen among those who start their learning and playing of brass instruments at their basic and secondary schools, churches, or their communities. The basic skills acquired on the instruments at that level eventually add to other requirements for admission into tertiary institutions that offer Music and then receive formal training. Otherwise, those who get recruited into the security services bands are given formal training at the early stages of their enlistment for effective performance on stage and at bandstands.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The study dwelt on the human capital theory by Becker and Schultz (1964) which posits that education, training, and health are investments that increase an individual's productivity, skills, and knowledge, directly resulting in higher future earnings and economic growth. The theory treats people as assets whose value can be enhanced, similar to physical capital. Among the key concepts of the theory are the investment in individuals where education and training are not regarded just as expenses but investments with individuals and companies expecting returns in the form of better jobs and higher output. With formal education, skills, and on-the-job training being some of the key components which contribute to the individual's value, this study argues that the ability of stakeholders – parents, churches, schools, philanthropists, communities – providing opportunities for the youth to acquire skills on brass instruments while, at the same time, undergoing formal education adds to their value for consideration for higher studies or recruitment if interested in any of the security service bands. Thus, this opportunity provided gives the individual long-term value for employment which eventually drives national economic growth and can reduce income inequality.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

The concept of skills acquisition and youth empowerment through creative arts participation guided this study. The framework was with the assumption that participation in brass bands leads to the acquisition of musical, social, and disciplinary skills, which subsequently enhance or aid employment opportunities within security service bands. The following figure illustrates the framework demonstrating the connect that exists between music participation and livelihood opportunities among Ghanaian youth.

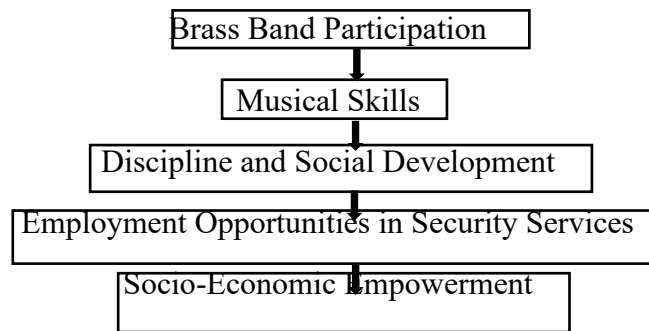


Figure 1: Conceptual framework illustration

3. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to examine how Ghanaian youth have utilised musical skills acquired through brass band participation as pathways to employment in the bands of the Ghana Armed Forces, Ghana Police Service, Ghana Prisons Service, Ghana Immigration Service, and Ghana National Fire Service. Qualitative description, according to Turale (2020), is well suited to studies that involve mixed methods or questionnaire design, or where there is a need to develop straight forward and first-hand description of the facts of the phenomena, such as professionals' knowledge of an event or experience. The study adopted a multiple-case study approach focusing on selected community, church, school, and security service brass bands in Ghana.

Data were collected from youth brass instrumentalists, security service band members, bandmasters, and recruitment officers through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. Purposive sampling technique was used to select participants with relevant experience and knowledge of brass band training and recruitment into security service bands. Purposive sampling procedures are used in most studies because they are found in any research paradigm and help in ensuring that quality sample is located without biases so as to increase the reliability and trustworthiness of the findings (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). The purposive sampling technique was therefore used in collecting primary data for the study. Notable participants like brass band members, service band members, bandmasters, and recruitment officers who had relevant experience and knowledge regarding brass band participation and recruitment into the forces and security service bands.

In all, forty-five (45) participants were involved in the study, comprising twenty-five (25) youth brass instrumentalists, twelve (12) security service band members, five (5) bandmasters or music directors, and three (3) recruitment officers. Secondary data were also obtained from academic literature, institutional publications, recruitment documents, and archival materials related to brass band traditions and security service music in Ghana. Data collected were analysed thematically by organising responses into recurring themes such as musical training, employment opportunities, recruitment experiences, youth empowerment, and socio-economic impact. To ensure validity and reliability, triangulation of interview, observation, and documentary data was employed, while ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly observed throughout the study.

4. Analysis of Data

Thematically, the data obtained from interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations were analysed. From the analysis emerged several recurring themes in connection with how Ghanaian youth utilise brass band musical skills as pathways to employment within

the bands of the Ghana Armed Forces, Ghana Police Service, Ghana Prisons Service, Ghana Immigration Service, and Ghana National Fire Service. In all, the seven recurring themes analysed were i. musical skills acquisition through brass bands, ii. brass band participation as a pathway to employment, iii. development of discipline and social values, iv. socio-economic empowerment through music, v. contribution of school, church, and community brass bands, vi. preservation of brass band traditions and national service, and vii. challenges faced by youth brass bands.

4.1 Musical Skills Acquisition through Brass Bands

On this theme, participants pointed out that school, church, and community brass bands served as very important avenues for the acquisition of musical skills and training. They acknowledged that the youth learned how to play brass instruments such as the trumpet, cornet, trombone, euphonium, tuba, and saxophone through continuous or regular rehearsals and mentorship from experienced players in the bands as well as from their leaders and or bandmasters. Many respondents explained that they developed competent skills in music reading, instrumental performance, breath control, and marching techniques through long-term participation in brass band rehearsals and engagements or programmes. This suggests that, informally, brass bands function as music education institutions, particularly for the youth who lack access to formal music training. One participant stated:

I have not been to any music school before but through the church brass band, I learnt to read music on the staff, I can do some sight-singing, and I can interpret some musical terms.

4.2 Brass Band Participation as a Pathway to Employment

The domineering theme that emerged from the data was the use of brass band experience as a means of gaining employment into the security services. All the participants reported that the musical proficiency obtained from the school, church, or community brass band they formally joined provided an enablement for them to qualify for recruitment into the security service bands. Participants noted that the security services often seek trained instrumentalists who can perform ceremonial, parade, and state functions; therefore, having such experience before applying for recruitment was very helpful. Participants further explained that musical ability gave them an advantage during recruitment exercises, especially when vacancies existed within service bands.

4.3 Development of Discipline and Social Values

The third theme analysis revealed that participation in any of the brass band types mentioned was a significant contributor to personal discipline and social development among the youth. Respondents described how rehearsals, performances, punctuality, teamwork, and obedience to band leadership prepared them for the disciplined environment of the security services. Most of the participants associated brass band culture with values such as commitment, respect for authority, team spirit, obedience, self-confidence, self-respect, and responsibility. These values were regarded as important qualities that enhanced successful integration into military and paramilitary institutions. As one respondent remarked:

If I had not learnt to acquire all such values in my school band, I don't think I could have survived the training and discipline here. The values I acquired there have helped me here indeed.

4.4 Socio-Economic Empowerment through Music

A very important or crucial finding from the study was that employment within the security service bands, immensely, improved the socio-economic conditions of many participants. Respondents indicated that joining the security services through music provided them with stable salaries, accommodation, healthcare, pensions, opportunities for further education, and

generally, a livelihood for themselves and their families. It was also explained by some participants that their musical careers helped reduce unemployment in the country and their financial dependency on others. Training, participation and performance in brass bands therefore emerged as a practical form of youth empowerment and livelihood creation. One respondent recounted that, were it not for the employment opportunities derived from his musical skills, he could not imagine how he and his family would have survived.

4.5 Contribution of School, Church and Community Brass Bands

One other important theme that emerged was the contribution of school, church, and community brass bands to youth development. Participants emphasised that these institutions or organisations provided free or very low-cost musical training and acted as supportive social networks for young musicians. Bandmasters and church leaders were described as mentors who guided youth not only in music but also in moral behavior and career choices. It was noticed that in many cases, church brass bands were the first point of exposure to brass instruments and structured music performance. With some church brass bands, the youth were exposed to stage concert performances, parade or marching drills, and occasionally, street processions. This training gave them an insight or firsthand knowledge of activities in the security service bands they got recruited into.

4.6 Preservation of Brass Band Tradition and National Service

The findings further showed that youth participation in security service bands contributes to the preservation of Ghana's brass band tradition. Participants explained that security service bands continue to perform at national ceremonies, parades, state events, and public celebrations, thereby sustaining the cultural and historical significance of brass band music in Ghana. The study therefore indicates that brass band musicians not only secure employment but also contribute to national identity, ceremonial culture, and public service through music.

4.7 Challenges Facing Youth Brass Musicians

In spite of the opportunities associated with brass band participation, there were a number of challenges that emerged from the interview and analysis. Among the difficulties participants recounted were limited funding for brass band activities, inadequate musical instruments, poor maintenance of band instruments, lack of rehearsal spaces, and limited access to formal music education. Concern was also expressed by some respondents that despite the employment opportunities and contribution to cultural development by brass bands, the attention or recognition given them, nationally, was quite minimal.

In sum, it was demonstrated, from the thematic analysis, that brass band formation and participation in Ghana serve multiple functions including musical skills development, creation of employment, youth empowerment, social discipline, cultural preservation, and national service. Thus, the importance of brass bands as both cultural institutions and practical avenues for career development among Ghanaian youth is highlighted by the findings.

5. Discussion of Findings

The study's findings evinced how brass band formation by schools, churches, and communities and participation by the youth have become an important avenue for youth empowerment and employment in Ghana. This is especially within the forces and security service bands - Ghana Armed Forces, Ghana Police Service, Ghana Prisons Service, Ghana Immigration Service, and the Ghana National Fire Service. The study revealed that practical musical skills were acquired by many young people through their participation in school, church, and community brass bands; and these skills later became valuable prerequisite for employment or recruitment into security service bands.

It was also found from the study that proficiency in brass instruments such as the trumpet, cornet, trombone, French horn, flugelhorn, euphonium, tuba, and other instruments used in the bands enhanced the employability of young musicians within the security services. As mentioned by a number of respondents, their competency in reading musical notation, ability to perform during parades and ceremonial functions, and adapt to military-style musical arrangements gave them competitive advantages during recruitment exercises. In some cases, participants noted that musical competence served as a direct entry pathway into the security institutions. Thus, the ability to use musical skills acquired from the training and performance on instruments for employment to earn a livelihood as observed in earlier studies such as Tolmie (2025), Huan and Keat (2024), and Toscher (2020) align with this finding.

A pivotal finding from the study was that the nurturing of life values like discipline, commitment, teamwork, tolerance, and leadership qualities among the youth stemmed, though not exclusively, from their brass band training and participation. It was explained by participants that the regular rehearsal attendance, public performances, and adherence to band structures equipped them both psychologically and socially for the strict, disciplined, and regimented terrain of the security services. This finding aligns with the broader understanding that music education is an eminent agent for personal development and social integration (Atilgan, 2021; Cuadrado, 2019; Danielewicz, 2021; Edgar, 2013; Szűcs & Juhász, 2023; Tetley, 2019).

Additionally, the findings demonstrated that employment from musical training and participation, especially in security service bands provides economic stability, social recognition, and long-term career opportunities for many young musicians. Participants acknowledged benefits such as regular income, professional development, pensions, accommodation, and opportunities for further education within the services. Owing to their successful employment or recruitment into the security service bands, many young musicians who hailed from very low-income families got themselves onto government payroll to earn regular income and the other benefits mentioned which transcend to their larger families eventually. In consequence, brass band participation was viewed by many respondents as both a cultural activity and a strategic employment pathway. This finding corroborates works by Shayo (2020), Baumann et al. (2008), Şakalar and Gürel (2023), and Latukefu and Pollard (2022).

One other eminent finding was how schools, churches and communities that have brass bands play crucial roles as informal vocational training centres. These institutions or groups provided free or, in some cases, very affordable musical instruction, mentorship, and opportunities for practical performance experience. This was especially for youth from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Therefore, the findings suggest that beyond brass bands functioning as cultural and recreational institutions or ensembles, they also function as mechanisms for social mobility and employment generation (Etheridge, 2024; Griffioen, 2024; Guénault, et. al., 2025; Odello, 2016; Tyler, 2022). Then, it was also revealed from the study that there is a heavy dependence on externally trained musicians, especially brass band instrumentalists, by the security service bands in Ghana. This continuous dependence is partially attributed to limited formal state-sponsored music training institutions in Ghana. Due to this, senior high schools which have managed to raise brass bands, churches, and communities which have been able to do same have become important feeder systems for recruiting skilled instrumentalists into the nation's security service bands. Earlier studies aligning with this finding include Manford (1983), Vitale (2011), Feichas (2010), Angel-Alvarado (2020), and Enkh-Amgalan and Narantsetseg (2025).

Regardless of the benefits or the opportunities obtained from brass band musical skills, several challenges affecting youth brass musicians were also identified or expressed by participants in the study. Salient among the challenges identified were inadequate funding for instruments and training, limited rehearsal spaces, inconsistent or unstructured music education programmes. A very grievous concern raised by participants which happens to be one focus of this study was the insufficient public recognition of brass band music as a viable career pathway. Some respondents also indicated, however, that it could be very competitive and there could also be some inconsistencies in the recruitment processes into the security services sometimes. This finding aligns with the challenges expressed in studies by Thomas (2011), Dordzro (2023), Spears and Dordzro (2024).

Generally, this study establishes that brass band formation and participation for and by the youth, as well as its music in Ghana serves an important socio-economic function beyond entertainment and ceremonial performance. It significantly contributes to youth employment, skills development, national service, and social inclusion while sustaining Ghana's brass band tradition within both civilian and security service institutions.

6. Conclusion

The brass band participation serves as an important pathway for youth employment and empowerment in Ghana. With the contribution or training given by school, church, and community brass bands, many young people acquire valuable musical and social skills that facilitate recruitment into the Ghana Armed Forces, Ghana Police Service, Ghana Prisons Service, Ghana Immigration Service, and Ghana National Fire Service bands. The study's findings demonstrate further that brass band music or participation contributes to discipline, teamwork, cultural preservation, and socio-economic mobility. Despite challenges like inadequate funding and limited training resources, brass bands remain important institutions for youth development and employment creation.

For its recommendations therefore, the study highlights the need for greater recognition and institutional support for brass band music as both a cultural practice and a vocational opportunity in Ghana. Government and cultural institutions are encouraged to provide greater support for school, church, and community brass bands through the provision of funds and instruments or logistics. Also, collaborations with school, church, and community brass bands to identify and train talented youth musicians should be initiated and strengthened by security services that have bands and need bandsmen to fill vacancies. Then, there should be an expansion in music education within schools to encourage students' participation in musical instrument training, especially brass band instruments. Furthermore, to improve the technical skills of brass band musicians in schools, churches, and communities, professional tutors should be engaged to run workshops and training programmes for them. Finally, it is recommended that the nation's policymakers should recognise brass band formation and participation as a very viable avenue for youth employment and cultural development.

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