

**Re-Examining the Education-Child Labour Nexus: The Case of Child Miners at
Kenyasi, Ghana**
Samuel Okyere

lqxso4@nottingham.ac.uk

Key Words: child labour, child miners, education, Ghana

Introduction

In 19th century Britain, legislation intended to regulate child labour “*proved to be unenforceable unless all children were required to attend school*” (Weiner, 1990 p. 114). Consequently, in Britain and over the world, education became not just a tool for personal and national development, but also a direct response to child labour (Anu, 2000; Post, 2001; Allais and Hageman, 2008). Over the years, international children’s rights policy makers have also instituted a plethora of education related campaigns aimed at getting children out of the labour market. For instance the ILO World Day against Child Labour in 2008 was under the theme: “*Education: The Right Response to Child Labour*”¹. The event sought to underscore the adverse impact of child labour on children’s education and on their development in general (ILO 2008a); a view which others have also noted (Heady, 2003; Guarcello et al, 2008).

The above is hardly contestable; there is evidence to show that child labour can impact negatively on children’s education (Bell and Gersbach, 2000; Heady 2003; Tzannatos, 2003). Nevertheless, using data from research with a group of children working in artisanal gold mining, this paper argues that the interconnectivity between some children’s presence on the labour market and their attainment of education is not entirely negative. Rather, as others have equally found, work is also the principal means by which some children are able to access their rights to education (Psacharopoulos, 1997; Ravioli and Wodon, 2001; Bass, 2004). The paper does not set out to idealise or promote child labour. Rather, it only calls for more nuanced analyses of the child labour-education nexus.

¹ http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/press-and-media-centre/press-releases/WCMS_094126/lang--en/index.htm

The paper is organised in three sections. First, an insight is offered into the fieldwork on which the paper is based. Next, I consider the phenomenon of child labour in Ghana and the use of education as an attempt to address it. The third part presents the empirical results of the research. It draws out the contradictions surrounding the use of education as a combative tool against child labour in the given context and also concludes the paper

The research

This paper is based on my PhD fieldwork which aimed to explore how the lived experiences of a group of child labourers fit with the dominant debates and policy directives on child labour. The ethnographic fieldwork was carried out over 15 weeks at an artisanal gold mining site at Kenyasi, a rural district in the Brong-Ahafo region of Ghana. It is acknowledged that 15-week ethnography is quite unlike the anthropological tradition where the researcher spends a more prolonged period in the field (Hancock, 2002, Buchanan and Bryman, 2009). Therefore, the fieldwork methodology is what is termed as focused ethnography; *“a peculiar form of sociological ethnography that differs from the anthropological tradition in the sense that it is marked by a relatively shorter visit”* (Knoblauch, 2005: p. 2). To compensate for its short time frame, focused ethnography is characterised by intensive data collection (Knoblauch, 2005).

In line with the above, at the onset, every conversation was recorded and notes were immediately made of events and occurrences. I often worked late into the night transcribing audio recordings and pouring over the data I had collected during the day in order to garner follow up information. I lived in the town for the entire duration of the fieldwork and commuted to the site daily with other workers. On numerous occasions, I slept at the site in order to observe what transpired there at night and to interact with some of the participants.

A total of 57 children (30 girls and 27 boys) aged 14 to 17 generously agreed to assist with the research and information was collected primarily through unstructured interviews. Using a very informal approach, I found that the participants shared their experiences in a more relaxed, open and frank manner which enabled me to gain

crucial insights into their lives (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009). I also observed the participants, and as Gans (1999: p. 50) has written of observation, it “allows researchers to report on what people do, while all other empirical methods are limited to reporting what people say about what they do”

At the end of the fieldwork, I had amassed a substantial volume of information (roughly four fieldwork diaries, about 180 hours of audio recordings comprising interviews and audio recording of other encounters and more than 500 photographs). To analyse and interpret the data, transcripts and typed notes were firstly combed to identify ideas of similar nature. The initial codes that were identified were then compared and overlapping ideas were merged. I returned to the data again, this time using a focused coding framework based on the thematic groups that had been identified. With time, over 15 broad codes related to such themes as “children’s reasons for working at the site”, children’s views of their participation in artisanal gold mining work”, “children’s ambitions”, and others related to the issues I had set out to explore, were eventually pulled out of the data.

Children’s work at the Kenyasi site

In Burkina Faso, Groves (2005) has described children working from 7am till dark under very harsh conditions at artisanal gold mining sites. Equally, Human Rights Watch (2011) has reported that in Mali, children dig mining shafts, they work underground, haul gold ore to the surface and also use mercury to amalgamate gold particles. The ILO (2005, 2001) suggests that this is representative of children’s participation in artisanal mining generally, but this was not the case at Kenyasi. Children there are mostly engaged in waged labour which usually starts at 8am and ends at 4 or 5pm, with an hour break between mid-day and 1pm. Their roles are highly gendered, as others have equally observed about work patterns at artisanal gold mining sites (Amankwah and Anim-Sackey, 2004; Yakovleva, 2007).

Girls and women at the site perform roles similar to those they have traditionally carried out at home. Girls’ work, and that of all females for that matter, includes carrying sand, stones and water from one location to the other. They also sell food, bagged water and various other items at the site. Some girls are also taken

on as shop helpers, “chop bar²” assistants and so on. Due to gender discrimination and the prevalence of superstitious beliefs, girls’ and women’s employment is generally quite limited at the site.

Boys have a wider range of work opportunities and they are also more likely to be involved in activities directly related to the processing of gold ore at the site. Their engagements include breaking extracted ore into smaller pieces to be grinded. Others use milling, crushing and grinding machines to transform the cracked rocks into fine dust. Many others are general labourers who can be hired to perform a variety of tasks, ranging from running errands, helping with the milling process, turning the grinded sand into slurry or mud, heaping the mud on wooden planks to be washed and so on.

An aspect of work at the site which troubled me deeply was the fact that there was very little use of safety and personal protection kit. All workers; both young and old, were, therefore, exposed to the numerous health hazards present at such places (Hilson, 2002). Unsurprisingly, some of the people I encountered complained of bodily pains, coughs, cuts, abrasions and so on. There was also the ever present danger of even more serious injuries or worse, fatalities. These contribute to the reasons why the ILO (2010) is opposed to children’s involvement in work at such places.

While the well-being of those working at the Kenyasi site did merit concern, there was no evidence to support the tag of criminality and lawlessness which Gueye (2001) and Faloon (2001) have associated with artisanal gold mining sites elsewhere. Far from being disorderly, the site was led by a committee which set rules to guide the behaviour of people working there. For instance, fighting was strictly prohibited and offenders stood the risk of being banished. Therefore, while the setting was not necessarily a safe place to live and work, so far as peace and communal harmony were concerned, life at the Kenyasi artisanal gold mining site was not much different from that in any ‘normal’ setting.

² This term is used to signify small restaurants at market centres and other public areas. They mostly sell fufu, banku and other local dishes

Child labour in Ghana

Ghana is situated within the sub-Saharan Africa region which has the world's largest proportion of working children; 26.4% of all 5-14 year-olds according to the ILO (2008b). In Ghana itself, about 10% of children (0.57 million) aged 5-17 participate fully in the labour market and do not attend school at all (ILO 2008a). The total number of Ghanaian children in the labour force is actually higher (1, 408,352), when the 841,139 who combine school with work are also taken into account (ILO 2008a). Unsurprisingly, child labour in Ghana (and other related subjects such as streetism, and independent child migration) has attracted a lot of interest over the years (Canagarajah and Coulombe, 1997; Riisøen et al, 2004; Hashim, 2005; ILO, 2007, Kwankye et al, 2007, to name a few).

The Ghanaian government has been attempting to address the issue. From a policy perspective, the Labour Act, 2003, the National Gender and Children Policy, 2004 and the 1998 Ghana Children's Act all have sections specifically targeted at reducing or eliminating child labour in the country. In addition, Ghana has ratified ILO Convention numbers 138 on the minimum age for admission to employment (Convention No. 138), and 182, on the worst forms of child labour (Convention 182).

Of more relevance to this paper, numerous educational programmes have also been instituted to boost school enrolment and thereby pull children found out of prohibited work engagements as the Ministry for Women and Children's Affairs asserts on its website:

the Government of Ghana has implemented and will continue to implement a number of programmes in collaboration with stakeholders, which directly address the child labour issue. Prominent among these is the full implementation of the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) policy through free attendance at public basic schools to disengage children from child labour.³

³ <http://goo.gl/h2j7G> Ghana Ministry for Women and Children's Affairs, accessed on June, 4, 2012

The FCUBE initiative was started in 1995 with the aim of getting all Ghanaian children into school within 10 years, by offering them tuition free attendance at the basic level in public schools (GES, 2003; de Lange, 2007). At the end of the FCUBE's 10 year tenure in 2005, the Government of Ghana (GoG) realised that the payment of school fees was going to be an impediment to school attendance for some children (GoG, 2006; Little, 2010). To address this issue, and also as part of general poverty alleviation, the government introduced the Capitation Grant (CG) (GoG, 2006). This new programme, as Little (2010, p. 1) explains, was "designed to relieve parents of the burden of paying tuition fees in public schools" as this cost was now borne by the government.

Currently, besides the Capitation Grant, in some parts of the country there is also a state sponsored school feeding programme which equally aims (in part) to boost enrolment and retention in basic schools. In addition, children on the way to school or those in school uniform are offered free transportation on the country's Metro Mass Transit bus network, while others are also provided with free school uniforms, note books and educational supplies at no cost (GoG Press Release⁴)

Undoubtedly, a fair amount of investment has gone into the promotion of basic education in the country. Yet, there are doubts as to whether these initiatives are necessarily having the desired impact. As Akyeampong (2009) asserts, between 1996 and 2006, school enrolment actually declined among children from very poor families in spite of the FCUBE. Similarly, in their assessment of the Capitation Grant, Osei et al (2009, p. 21) have concluded that it has not led to any significant gains in school enrolment rates. Rolleston (2009) and Hilson (2010) have also voiced similar concerns about the impact of the FCUBE and the Capitation Grant on school attendance in the three northern regions of Ghana. Hashim (2005) also partly attributes the migration of young boys and girls from the northern part of the country to the south, to the continued poor educational access experienced in the north.

⁴ <http://goo.gl/Oziiu> Ghana Free School Uniform Programme launched by First Lady (accessed, August, 4, 2012)

These observations were lent further credence by the accounts of the children who participated in this research, as will be explored in the next section. Evidence from the fieldwork showed that though the FCUBE, the CP and similar initiatives are useful, they have been inadequate in keeping some children in school and out of the labour market as intended.

Working children's views on work and education

50 of the 57 children who participated in this study were in full time education. This was quite unexpected because some of the texts I had reviewed prior to the fieldwork suggested that children in such occupations tend to be school drop-outs or do not attend at all (Jennings, 1999; ILO, 2005). When questioned about their motivation for taking up work at the site, over 80% suggested that it was in order to fund their education. They also attributed their situation mainly to financial distress in their households.

“My father cannot give us school chop money and my elder sister has already stopped school because of this. I came here with some girls to see if I can get some money by myself and continue school next term” (Mercy, 14 08/7/2010).

“I have been coming for 3 vacations now.....there is nobody to help me and that is why I do this” (Rocky, 16, 16/8/2010).

“.....it is true that we don't pay school fees, but that is not the only problem.....there is no money at home, there is even nothing to eat....that is also a problem because if there is nothing at home, you can't go” (Eugene, 17, 20/7/2010).

“Sometimes I need money urgently and my mother cannot afford. That day I don't go to school, or maybe I don't do extra classes that day and I come here to work to find the money” (Albert, 17, 6/8/2010).

Most of the children were in Junior High School and the capitation grant caters for fees at this level. In theory they should therefore not have been working to fund their schooling. However, a deeper examination of schooling costs reveals

that there are other substantial elements besides school fees. As Osei and others (2009, p. 4-5) have therefore argued:

School fee abolition is not just about “tuition fees” (which do not necessarily constitute the main bulk of fees). School fee abolition must take into consideration the wide range of the costs of schooling to families and households. This means any direct and indirect costs/charges (tuition fees, costs of text books, supplies and uniforms, PTA contributions, costs related to sports and other school activities, costs related to transportation, contributions to teachers’ salaries, etc

Table 1: Breakdown of extra school costs

Item	Senior High School	Junior High School	Primary school
School Fees	300GHS	FREE	FREE
Text and exercise books	50GHS	30GHS	15GHS
School Uniforms	20GHS	20GHS	20GHS
Extra tuition fees	15GHS	15GHS	10GHS
Pocket money	25GHS	20GHS	20GHS
Miscellaneous	10GHS	10GHS	10GHS
Total average	420GHS	95GHS	75GHS

Table 1: average schooling costs (estimates from teachers, parents and pupils in Kenyasi) Currency conversion- £1=2.5GHS

The costs shown on the above table are for a single term, typically a period of three to four months. With about 7,000,000 Ghanaians, roughly 30% of the population living on less than \$1.25 a day (UNDP Human Development Indicators 2011⁵), it is not surprising that some families find these costs insurmountable and their wards drop out of school. Instead of doing so, some children, like those I encountered at Kenyasi attempt to put themselves through school by seeking income earning opportunities.

⁵ <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/GHA.html>

None of the children at the site actually considered their work to be a worthwhile occupation. They simply saw it as a means through which they may be able to make a better future for themselves, as Anane intimated:

What we do here is only *galamsey*⁶ and nobody wants to do that forever. We come here to look for school money and go back because today if you don't go to school, you have not future (Anane, 17, 24/7/2010).

Their disinterest in pursuing long term employment at the site was not just because the children preferred schooling, but also many of them disliked working at the site due to a variety of reasons:

“This is very dirty work. The sand and the dust get in your face, your mouth and everywhere, even your eyes. Everytime I have to come here and find money, I am not happy about it” (Jude, 15, 12/8/2010).

“After work, you feel like somebody has beaten you up. Your whole body pains you. Sometimes, you are so tired you just want someone to carry you home but you know everybody is also tired” (Esi, 15, 22/8/2010).

“I don't like this work because you can get injured at any time here if you are not careful. I have not been injured before, but I have seen a man who smashed his hand with a hammer when he was working” (Ebo, 16, 01/09/2010).

And yet, the participants were also quick to counter the suggestion that they should not be permitted further work at the site because as the ILO (2010) has argued, it is a worst form of child labour.

⁶ A corrupted version of the English phrase ‘gather them and sell’.

“I know it is difficult and dangerous work but if someone tells me to stop working, then the person must give me money to go to school too” (Evelyn 14, 16/8/2010).

“....people say this work is bad and so we should stop and go to school,...but if I can't buy books, shoes and other things I need, how can I go to school?...I will go to school but I can't eat school if I am hungry”. (James 15, 21/7/2010).

“I am in JS3 at the moment and I take care of myself, I also help my mother when she needs money and I give my younger sister money too. I swear to God if it was not for this work I have been coming here to do, I don't know what my life will have become by now.... I think I will have been part of those boys doing armed robbery in Kumasi and Sunyani....if you tell me to stop today then I am finished” (Adu, 17, 21/07/2010).

This conflicting feedback (the fact that they disliked the work but did not want to be excluded) also gave an indication of the difficult circumstances which compel the children to take up work. They offered a variety of response when questioned about why they had chosen artisanal gold mining work and not any other. Some acknowledged that though there were numerous challenges surrounding what they did at the site, they did not see their work itself to be much difficult from what they did at home:

I make about twenty trips of sand or water every day when I come here. Sometimes, I get very tired but I am used to it because I do the same type of work at home. Our house is a long way from the farm but when we go to the there every day, we carry all the heavy foodstuff, firewood and other things back home. Even then nobody pays me for it for it when I get tired. So this one is even better (Yvonne, 17, 01/07/2010).

The predominant explanation however, was that relative to other occupations which were readily available to them; they could earn more money quicker in artisanal gold mining. Most of the children worked at the site on vacations and because the recess lasted for only about 3-6 weeks, they were in a race against time to save as much

money as possible for the next three month school term. As such, though they had been compelled to take up work because of their circumstances, and while in reality they had few options, they were also making active choices and decisions about the sort of work they preferred. The research participants could therefore be deemed to be exercising “thin agency....decisions and everyday actions that are carried out within highly restrictive contexts, characterised by few viable alternatives” (Klocker, 2007, p85)

More fundamentally, contrary to the often stated view that education is the means by which children are to be disengaged from child labour (Ravioli and Wodon, 1999, Burns et al, 2003) at Kenyasi, education was found to be the reason for their involvement in an occupation labelled as a worst form of child labour. Ray (2000) and Tzannatos (2003) argue that poverty is the key impediment to children’s inability to attend school. This paper agrees with them; the children’s education was not threatened because they worked at the site, but rather due to financial constraints in their homes and in the country more generally. This is a situation the government of Ghana recognised and attempted to address through such initiatives as the FCUBE and Capitation Grant. However, as noted earlier, these initiatives have proven to be inadequate for children from very poor families and deprived areas (Akyeampong 2009).

The linkage between child labour and education has to be placed within the context of children’s wider life opportunities and experiences, as Ananga (2011, p 8) has equally suggested in relation to school drop-outs:

It would be irresponsible, impossible and a waste of resources to pursue any intervention aimed at facilitating the rehabilitation of drop-outs into the education system without first reaching an understanding of how their daily experiences in and out of school shape their aspirations in terms of education, work and economic well-being.

In that sense, the research participants’ cases lend credence to arguments that in some cases, child labour is not incompatible with children’s education and their livelihood in general (Bourdillon 2006). Their situation equally problematises some of the claims made about children in such situations. For instance, the ILO (2009, p12)

has asserted that children working in artisanal mining have “no educational or future perspective”, while Wahba (1998, p. 1) has added that child labour allows them “no room for dreams”. And yet, those at Kenyasi were not only actively pursuing education with the hope of securing their future, but also their attempts were mainly predicated on earnings from their work in artisanal gold mining.

My argument that there has to be more complex readings of such situations is by no means novel. Others have equally called for a more nuanced approach towards child labour than is currently the case (White, 1996; Levison et al, 2001; Lieten, 2003). Myers and Boyden (1998) have offered an alternative to the demand by ILO Convention 182 that children working at places such as Kenyasi should be immediately or unconditionally prevented from doing so. They argue that instead, child labour should be approached on the basis of three key principles; the nature of children’s work, how it affects them and how it relates to other aspects of their lives (Myers and Boyden, 1998, p. 6).

It is a truism that the nature of the children’s work can lead to harmful lifelong health effects (Calvert, 2003). And yet, it is also the case that income from the site has been the means by which they attempt to feed themselves, help their families, access healthcare and more relevantly access their rights to education. If education is indeed the surest way to guarantee a better future for working children as Watkins (2000), Glewwe (2002), Bruns et al (2003) Fyfe (2005) and many others have argued, then denying the research participants access to work at the site may equally harm them. If they are cast out without first being offered sustainable, viable and accessible alternatives, their chances of getting education, and potentially, better future employment or livelihood prospects could be jeopardised. Such action could equally leave them trapped in poverty (Emerson and Souza, 2003), with its attendant harms

Far from idealising children’s engagement in a difficult and dangerous occupation, I have merely pointed out how the lived experiences of the children who took part in the fieldwork speak to certain claims made in connection with their situation.

Conclusion

Without a doubt, education can play a big role in addressing child labour and securing children's future. Considering that children who are not in school may be more likely to be found in the labour market, it seems logical that child labour preventative efforts have been married with initiatives such as the education for all campaign (ILO 2006, UNICEF 2007). There have been gains made in some parts of the world as result of this strategy, according to UNESCO (2007). Yet, in sub-Saharan Africa and the Asia-Pacific regions, there is not much clarity in the effectiveness of the use of education as the primary combative tool against child labour. As UNESCO (2007) concedes, the target of achieving education for all by 2015 is unlikely to be attained in these parts of the world.

I will offer an explanation for the inability to attain this target. In developed countries, there are relatively well resourced support structures to drive the implementation, monitoring and enforcement of children's rights and protection policies. There are also supplementary measures to further assist children and families for whom more support is needed. On the contrary, in developing nations such as Ghana, this is not the case. The harsh reality in many developing nations is that the state is unable to offer any meaningful forms of support to children when parents are unable to do so. This has been the case with the country's FCUBE and CG initiatives as can be deduced from the children's accounts. It is this lack of the sort of fairly comprehensive child support structure such as those found in developed nations, which has compelled the children to support their education through earnings from artisanal gold mining work.

I therefore conclude that fundamentally the reason why some child labourers are unable to access their rights to education is because there are inadequate provisions made for them, and not necessarily because of the work they do. Indeed, from the participants' narratives, it can be argued that so far as their education is concerned, artisanal gold mining work has actually been the solution and not the problem. To suggest that the correlation between the children's work and their

education is not negative is not to imply that there are no justified concerns about their safety and well-being. From the children's own accounts, their work is dirty and difficult and they will not do it if other viable alternatives are given them.

If education is to become a truly effective tool in combating child labour in poor countries, campaigns such as the FCUBE and the Capitation Grant must have more depth than is currently the case. More importantly, child labour elimination efforts must be targeted at poverty and other livelihood constraints which are the underlying causes behind children's inability to access their rights to education, health, food and others offered them by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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