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Work and Happiness: children’s activities in Ghana

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Abstract

Background: Children constitute a form of social labour in Africa. They are engaged in various forms of activities. In Ghana, adults typically decide activities for children. Some of these activities constitute a positive element in the child’s development; others contravene existing frameworks that seek to protect children. However, very little research has been done to explore children’s agency in contesting views of adults with respect to their activities. The study therefore explores children’s deployment of agency to contest normative views about their work.

Methods: The study draws on data from a larger project entitled ‘Children, Transport and Mobility in sub-Saharan Africa’. In Ghana, the Central and Brong Ahafo Regions were selected. Four study settlements comprising remote-rural, rural, peri-urban and urban characteristics were selected from each region to explore the similarities and differences in activities among children between the ages of 8 and 18 using qualitative and quantitative techniques. This study focuses on the qualitative data.

Results: Sex, age, cultural orientation, seasonality and status of a child influenced tasks assigned to children. Likes and dislikes of tasks depended on the tedious, duration and associated dangers. Children used resistance, rearrangement, group work and ‘delay tactics’ as forms of agency to express dislike of certain tasks. Male-children were more likely to exercise agency in one of these ways compared to female-children.

Conclusions: Cultural perception of childhood defines children’s activities in Ghana. In order to support the interests of both children and adults, activity-evaluation must be done with children. This would enhance work and happiness.

Keywords: children, porterage, agency, activities, work.
**Introduction**

Children engage in a wide range of activities. As social assets to households, children may help their parents or guardians, and in some cases themselves, by performing certain tasks for domestic and economic purposes. Some tasks are seen to serve as a platform for a gradual initiation into adulthood and a positive element in the child’s development (United Nations International Child Educational Fund (UNICEF), 1997; Fyfe, 1989). As a result, children are often engaged in a number of household work or activities in many parts of the world (International Labour Organisation, 2000; Ahmed and del Ninno, 2003; Porter and Abane, 2009).

Children’s work is categorised into domestic and economic activities. In relation to age, when a child’s work exceeds a minimum number of hours, it ceases to be work, but labour. For instance, if a child aged 5-13 is engaged in an hour of economic work or 28 hours of domestic work per week, such work is defined as ‘labour’ (UNICEF, 2008). For adolescents aged between 14-17 years, work becomes ‘labour’ if its duration is more than 43 hours work per week (UNICEF, 2008). From the perspective of children, especially within the African (including Ghanaian) context, they are expected to obey and respect directives of adults including the work they engage in (Twum-Danso, 2009).

A number of legislative instruments and frameworks guide children’s engagement in work. These include the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), respective national constitutions and legislations such as Ghana’s 1992 Constitution and The Children’s Act, 1998, as well as other regional and sub-regional frameworks (Twum-Danso, 2009; Randell Gergel, 2009). However, in Africa, and specifically in Ghana, children’s activities are often largely decided by adults. This can be attributed to a strong cultural view that a child is supposed to obey the adult in all circumstances without any protest (Porter and Abane, 2009). However, very little research has been done on exploring children’s agency in contesting views of adults regarding their activities or work.

This study is situated within the theoretical framework of cultural relativism. The theory explains that values are shared ideals which give rise to beliefs and norms of behaviour around which a people or a group organizes its collective life and goals. These values, according to the theory, are relative to the cultural setting out of which they arise (Rosado, 1994). This study, therefore, endeavours to explore children’s and adults’ perceptions of children’s activities in Ghana to address the following questions:
• To what extent do children enjoy the activities they are engaged in?
• How do children respond to views of adults about their work?
• To what extent and how do children exercise agency in contesting normative views about their work?

Theoretical and Conceptual Issues

In Ghana, as much as in Africa, many household activities are strongly gendered. Traditionally, household activities including home management and child rearing were considered the preserve of women, while men were the principal bread-winners. Until recently, this orientation detrimentally affected the formal education of females but favoured that of their male counterparts (Randell, 2009; Canagarajah and Coulombe, 1997).

Some of these cultural influences, which were considered discriminatory, culminated in the enactment, establishment and development of some legislative instruments to protect, guide and promote the interests, development and welfare of children. For instance, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) generally prescribes three broad categories of rights encompassing protection, provision and participation.

In Ghana, affairs that affect children are guided by the 1992 Constitution of Ghana, The Children’s Act, 1998 (Act 560) of Ghana, as well as other legislative instruments such as the Human Rights Act of 1998. In addition, there was deliberate government policy to promote and encourage more girls to attend school. This has resulted in a sharp decline of illiteracy rates among females from 1960 to 2000 and a reduction in gender imbalances in literacy and education. Notwithstanding, illiteracy is high in rural areas (National Population Council, 2006).

Meanings and values of childhood are highly culturally specific (Boakye-Boaten, 2010). Culture plays a key role in shaping the tasks that people, including children, perform. According to Boakye-Boaten (2010), children in Ghana are socialised through various institutional structures to acquire cultural behaviours of the society. Thus, as explained by the theory of cultural relativism, cultural systems are said to constitute a total social world that reproduces itself through enculturation; a process by which values, emotional dispositions, and embodied behaviours are transmitted from one generation to the next (Brown, 2008). Conformity and obedience to such values and norms of these institutional structures, controlled by adults, are crucial in child training.
The government of Ghana and international institutions have different chronological bases of conceptualising childhood. The 1992 Constitution of Ghana and the International Labour Organisation (ILO), for instance, define a child as a person below age 18, while the World Health Organisation (WHO) defines a child as a person less than five years. These definitions provide various roles and responsibilities of adults and governments regarding the welfare and development of the child. In this study we use the terms ‘children’ and ‘young people’ interchangeably to refer to our study participants aged 8-18 years.

Contextually, lack of or inadequate access to certain social infrastructure such as good roads, potable water, health facilities and schools, especially in rural and remote-rural communities in Ghana, profoundly influences children’s tasks and workloads. Children in such communities do not only sometimes forgo education; they may also be involved in some activities inimical to their welfare and development (Tanle and Awusabo-Asare, 2007). Sometimes, some of these cultural or adult dictates go contrary to existing legislative instruments outlined above, either knowingly or not.

Methods and study setting

This paper draws on data collected in Ghana as part of a large multi-country research project: Children, Transport and Mobility in Sub-Saharan Africa (www.dur.ac.uk/child.mobility), designed and led by Durham University (UK), in collaboration with the University of Cape Coast (Ghana), and the University of Malawi and CSIR (South Africa). Details of the project study design, methodology and analysis (where it relates to Ghana) can be found in Porter et al (this volume); see also Porter et al (2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d, 2011 in press; Robson et al, 2009). Briefly, the Child Mobility project was conducted in 24 field-sites across three countries: Ghana, Malawi and South Africa. In each field-site, qualitative and quantitative research methods were used to gather data on children’s mobility in relation to education, health, livelihoods, transport and migration. In this paper, we draw on the material collected in the Ghana field-sites.

In Ghana, fieldwork was conducted in Central Region (southern coastal zone) and Brong Ahafo (central belt forest zone). The Central region constitutes about 9% of the national population with Cape Coast as the metropolitan capital. Akans form 82% of the region’s population, of which 69% are Fantes. The forest zone is also mainly composed of Akans (62.7%), mainly Bonos and Asantes. Other prominent groupings mainly from the northern part of the country include the Mole Dagbon, Gurma and Grusi.
Four study settlements were selected in each zone: one urban, one peri-urban, one rural with basic services and one remote rural. Urban and peri-urban settlements comprised settlements with social services such as school, health centres and communication networks. While school services (basic, not secondary) were found in rural settlements, remote rural settlements had no services. The purpose was to explore the similarities and differences in activities and mobility issues among children between the ages of 8 and 18 (see Porter and Hampshire, this edition). Children make up a substantial proportion of the population in Ghana: according to Ghana’s population and housing census, children under fifteen years constituted 41% of the population (Ghana Statistical Service, 2005).

The project adopted both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Qualitative data were first collected from children (in-school and out-of-school), parents (both male and female) as well as settlement leaders such as chiefs, head teachers, and religious leaders. Qualitative methods of data collection included accompanied walks with children (Porter et al., 2010a), in-depth interviews, life histories and focus-group discussions (with children and settlement leaders).

The project also trained children on basic research methods to collect data (qualitative and quantitative) from other children in their various localities (Porter et al., 2010c; Robson et al., 2009; Hampshire et al., 2012, forthcoming). In addition, the young researchers were introduced to basic skills in photography to help them to collect data with a camera. The young researchers used the data to write a book entitled ‘Children, transport and mobility’ (available on the project website at www.dur.ac.uk/child.mobility/).

A random sample of 1005 child-respondents comprising in-school and out-of-school children of ages 8 to 18 was selected and questionnaires were administered to them accordingly to collect the quantitative data. About 53% were females while 47% were males. This is broadly consistent with the national data of 51% and 49% respectively (Ghana Statistical Service, 2005). In this paper we present analysis of the data that relates to children’s activities in Ghana.

Field assistants were drawn from the University of Cape Coast for the entire project. These were made up of lecturers, research assistants and post-graduate students. After a week training and pre-testing, a pilot study was conducted not only to ensure reliability and validity of the instrument, but also to enable the research team to organise administratively and culturally to minimize challenges during the actual field work (Babbie, 2005; Sarantakos, 2005). Notwithstanding, the team faced some challenges especially with out-of school children, some of whom were concerned about loss of income from time being interviewed.
Economic activities varied by study site. The urban settlements served as commercial and administrative towns in the respective zones. The other settlements were mainly farming communities. Other secondary occupations included charcoal processing and *pito* [local drink] brewing specifically in the coastal and forest zones respectively.

Poverty dimensions in the study zones are worth noting. The coastal zone lies within the fourth poorest region in the country (Ghana Statistical Service, 2005). Because a major focus of the Child Mobility Study (see below) was poverty, settlements of relatively low socio-economic status were selected. However, the remote rural sites in each zone experienced the highest levels of absolute poverty.

**Results**

*Children’s activities*

Generally, adults expected children to work in one way or another to support households domestically and, in certain instances, economically. Children are involved in two broad types of activities: in-house and out-of-house activities. Examples of in-house activities are sweeping, washing dishes, and cooking and, sometimes, income-generating activities such as selling iced water or toffee from the home. Out-of-house activities include fetching water from water sources outside the house, other porterage activities, tasks on the farm, and activities at the market.

Children’s task schedules were found to vary according to time and day of the week. Morning tasks were commonly in-house, apart from fetching water from different sources, while afternoon and evening tasks were more often out-of-house, especially for children in the forest zone. On Saturdays, most of the activities were out-of-house. Out-of-school children were more likely to be involved in out-of-house activities for most of the day.

*In-house activities*

Children’s tasks differed according to age and sex as determined by parents/guardians, based on their cultural orientation or general perception. Generally, older children performed more household chores than younger children in both ecological zones. Washing dishes, sweeping rooms and compounds and other minor errands in the house were usually performed by younger children. Older children on the other hand were tasked to undertake some household chores that demand more cognitive and physical ability such as taking care of younger
children, washing clothes, cooking, and pounding *fufu* [a local cassava-based staple food].

Tasks, however, varied with the sex of young people in both ecological zones. Cooking, washing household clothes, bathing of younger children and fetching water were usually the preserve of female children. In the forest zone, this division of labour is most pronounced among migrants from the northern parts of the country, and is culturally-bound. Alongside performing household chores, female children in rural and remote rural settlements also engaged in farm and farm-related activities, as did male children.

Among the Akans, particularly in the coastal zone, gender differences in activities were generally less pronounced than among ‘northern groups’. Though tasks were still gendered, it was not uncommon to find male children assigned tasks at the kitchen including cooking. Other parents said that they assigned tasks to their children not on the basis of gender, but simply to ensure that work was completed on time:

> I don’t have any particular reason for giving different tasks to different children (including foster children). I have shared the tasks to the children to facilitate early completion. I do this so that the children can go to school early.
> [Parent, 48 years, urban, coastal zone]

Fostering can also affect young people’s activities. Fostered children typically report being involved in more household tasks as compared to the own-children of guardians. Respondents who were fostered commented that they had to do a lot of tasks which at times affected their school attendance (see Agblorti and Tanle, this volume).

**Children’s evaluation of in-house activities**

The key factors shaping children’s evaluation of activities, irrespective of sex, study zone and residence status, were: how tedious it was seen to be, how long it would take, other characteristics of the tasks (e.g. tiring, dirty work), and perceived usefulness for future. These issues are highlighted in the following children’s accounts:

> I enjoy cooking. Food preparation helps one to know how to cook very well especially if it is done consistently. I want to cook well in future so I enjoy cooking in the house.
> [Female, 14 years, rural, forest zone]
It is a bit difficult cooking. That is what I dislike. I always cook everyday so I get tired. I wake up at 5:30 am and go to bed at 10.00pm. I spend most time cooking. I don’t get enough sleep, mainly due to hours of cooking.

[Female, 13 years, peri-urban, coastal zone]

I dislike washing dishes. This is because I dislike contact with oily substances in the dishes. I like sweeping because it is the easiest of tasks. I only sweep one room daily.

[Male, 15 years, remote rural, coastal zone]

These accounts suggest that the task *per se* is not the object of dislike, but rather, the motivation of the child, the direct physical effects of the task as well as personal orientation of a child.

**Out-of-house activities**

Children’s activities transcend to domains outside the home. Common among these are porterage and weeding. Porterage, practised widely by both boys and girls in Ghana, includes carrying of water, firewood, charcoal and foodstuffs from the farm, wares and other loads to and from the market (Porter, Blaufuss and Acheampong, 2007; and in press; Porter et al. forthcoming). While some of these activities are performed daily, others are executed on a weekly basis depending on the settlement type, the prevailing season as well as economic activity a household is engaged in.

**Porterage**

1. **Fetching and carrying water from the riverside and other water points**

Water was the most commonly carried load by children. A little over 76% percent of the children surveyed carried water every day in the week preceding the survey (Table 1), while 42.4% said it was the heaviest load carried in the preceding week. Children in remote-rural and rural settlements often fetched water from rivers/streams, but even in urban and peri-urban areas, many households do not receive a reliable supply of water, and children are often charged with fetching water from various points, including rivers.

Formerly, we were drinking from a river here until we got connected and provided with pipe-borne water from a reservoir. Unfortunately, we have experienced cessation of pipe-borne water
flow for the past many months....So now most of the local people fetch from the river.
[Settlement leader, 49 years, peri-urban, coastal zone]

Every child in my household is supposed to fetch water four times a day with a gallon. At times we go once in morning and thrice in the evening to avoid being late to school. We fetch from the river which is about 400 metres from my house.
[Male, 12 years, peri-urban, coastal zone]

Table 1: Number of days respondents carried water in the week preceding the survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex of respondent</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>A few days (1-3 days)</th>
<th>Most days (4-6 days)</th>
<th>Everyday</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>60 (11.5)</td>
<td>35 (6.7)</td>
<td>28 (5.3)</td>
<td>401 (76.5)</td>
<td>524 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>58 (12.3)</td>
<td>35 (7.4)</td>
<td>21 (4.5)</td>
<td>356 (75.7)</td>
<td>470 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>118 (11.9)</td>
<td>70 (7.0)</td>
<td>49 (4.9)</td>
<td>757 (76.2)</td>
<td>994 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Child Mobility Survey (2005)

The water availability situation becomes grave during the dry season in both ecological zones, particularly in the rural forest-zone settlements. This is because many water-points (rivers(streams)) dry up in the dry (harmattan) season in Ghana. Some children recounted walking for more than two kilometres to look for water for the household. This did not only make them tired, but also affected regular attendance to school and farm (see also Porter et al. 2011 in press). Some of them complained of neck and back pains.

Other children secured water in the dry season by digging out, a process where the bedrock of the river/stream is dug and scooped to reach out for water. In Ghana both boys and girls carry a heavy water burden: about 77% of girls and about 76% of boys (Table 1) carried water every day (see Porter et al. forthcoming for further discussion).

2. Porterage of firewood, foodstuff and charcoal from the farm

After water, firewood was the second most carried and second heaviest load in all study settlements, especially in peri-urban and rural communities where firewood is the main source of fuel for cooking. Firewood was usually collected from farms and bush-land. Average distance covered was between 3-5 km, while
loads carried weighed up to 20kg. Just over half of children surveyed had carried firewood in the preceding week. Most children (46% males and 44% females) carried firewood a few days (one to three days) of the preceding week (Table 2). Other factors influencing frequency of firewood collection by children included availability and accessibility of wood, frequency of use as well as prevailing weather conditions.

Table 2: Number of days children carried firewood in the week preceding the survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex of respondent</th>
<th>None at all (1-3 days)</th>
<th>A few days (4-6 days)</th>
<th>Most days (4-6 days)</th>
<th>Everyday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>223 (47.5)</td>
<td>217 (46.3)</td>
<td>12 (2.6)</td>
<td>17 (3.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>238 (45.4)</td>
<td>231 (44.2)</td>
<td>26 (5.0)</td>
<td>28 (5.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>461 (46.5)</td>
<td>448 (45.2)</td>
<td>38 (3.8)</td>
<td>45 (4.5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Child Mobility Survey (2005).

During the harvest season, many children carried foodstuffs such as cassava, plantain, yam and maize, mainly for household consumption, as well as charcoal for economic purposes. Some children carried charcoal from the processing points to accessible farms for tractors to cart it to the communities or the market centres. The charcoal business was vibrant in the peri-urban community in the coastal zone. These tasks were usually performed by older children on Saturdays and Sundays. In some instances, boys borrowed or hired hand trucks to carry the load for financial rewards.

3. Porterage at market places

Porterage goes beyond just carrying goods to the market. Two main forms of porterage were identified in the study; hawking and kayaye (see Tanle and Awusabo-Asare, 2007). Kayaye is a local name for girls who carry goods for economic purposes. Hawking goods was commonly done by in-school children, usually after school, to supplement household income; out-of-school children were more involved in kayaye, especially in the forest zone as a survival strategy.

There were also a few instances where in-school children, mainly girls, were actively involved in personal economic enterprise under the guidance and supervision of their parents; in most cases, the parents were involved in a similar business. A 14-year old female primary six pupil in a peri-urban settlement in the coastal zone shared her experience.
I realised that my parents were not able to meet all of our needs so I decided to enter into charcoal trading because it is the main product to sell here. I started selling charcoal in Elmina and my mother encouraged me. I now sell in Cape Coast. The charcoal business is my own business.

This girl, and others like her, exercise agency in adopting income generating activities in order to meet some of the personal, school or other needs because their parents are incapable of meeting all their personal and academic expenses largely due to household poverty (see Mariwah and Esia-Donkoh, this volume).

**Dangers associated with out-of-house activities**

Children's lived experiences of carrying out daily tasks entailed physical and psychological challenges. Activities such as fetching water and going to work on the farm could expose them to dangers, including fear of animals, especially snakes, and risk of physical injuries, especially among children in the remote rural sites:

I see snakes often on the road to farm and this is scary. Also I have cut my hand before [shows scar on the left hand]. I was weeding and held a tree to cut it and unfortunately, I cut my hand.

[Male, 13 years, rural, forest zone]

I usually go to the riverside with my siblings or other children in the community. I am scared of ‘water snakes’. We have been told that they are very poisonous. I am therefore scared to fetch water alone from the river.

[Female, 12 years, peri-urban, coastal zone]

Urban and peri-urban children were also subject to danger during their work activities. Some of the children were scared about rough terrains while working. Others were scared about ‘dangerous’ vehicles such as tipper trucks and taxis. These were attributed to narrow roads, lack of pedestrian paths and to some extent reckless driving.

Other common complaints among children were pains associated with load-carrying. In the week preceding the survey, 41.1% of children reported experiencing neck-ache, 16.8% headache and 10.7% waist/back pains as a result of porterage (see also Porter et al, forthcoming). Some children were given pain killers for relief by their parents or guardians; others self-medicated. Some (but
not all) community leaders and parents also commented on these health impacts of children’s load-carrying work (see Mariwah and Esia-Donkoh, this volume).

**Children’s evaluation of out-of-house activities**

Children evaluated their out-of-house tasks based on a number of factors, mainly, difficulty in performing a task, duration involved, physical pain/discomfort, potential dangers as well as environmental conditions such as the weather. A few children reported that they preferred fetching water to other tasks such as cooking because it was less tedious and mostly unsupervised so there was room to play at water points. At times, they went to play on the pretext of going to fetch water.

Farming and farm-related activities were considered the most tedious tasks, usually in rural and remote-rural settlements, while market-related activities such as *kaya-yei* and hawking were also considered tedious, especially when performed under the scorching sun:

- **Going to farm and carrying loads like cassava and firewood is the tedious of all the tasks I do. It is difficult for me. I usually feel pains in my neck and feet. I therefore dislike such task.**
  
  [Female, 14, remote-rural, coastal zone]

- **I dislike going to the farm. We work in the sun and that is most tedious. After those tasks in the sun, you are supposed to carry firewood as well and walk for an hour before coming to the house to cook and eat. If I had my own way, I would stop going to farm.**
  
  [Male, 16, rural, coastal zone]

- **Hawking is difficult. I hawk in the sun so it becomes difficult for me. I wish I don’t sell that way but in a store or under a shade. I am scared when hawking also because of the fear of someone taking my money. I once lost my sales and got beaten by my mother.**
  
  [Female, 10, urban, forest zone]

**Children’s general perceptions about their tasks**

It is difficult, if not impossible, for children to openly express their views about tasks assigned to them by adults and parents. Complaints about work are seen as amounting to disrespect towards elders, who are thought to know what is best for the child (Porter and Abane, 2009; Twum-Danso, 2009). However, some children were of the opinion that some of the tasks assigned to them were tedious while others were wrongly assigned. Some thought that some of the
tasks conflicted with their scarce leisure opportunities; and some male children in urban settlements and mostly in forest zone opined that it was inappropriate for them to engage in in-house activities such as washing dishes and cooking, which are seen as female-related activities.

Children responded to views about the tasks with varying degrees of openness. In most cases, girls and fostered children had more latent responses than boys and biological children. A similar difference existed between rural and urban settlements, perhaps because traditional values prevail more strongly in rural settlements.

Culturally, girls are expected to do all domestic tasks. Boys are not really supposed to do house chores if females are around. That is why males are not involved much in domestic tasks and females don’t complain of such workloads.

[Male parent, 45 years, rural, forest zone]

Responses of urban boys were generally more open, perhaps, partly owing to some forms of local and media-related exposure (Twum-Danso, 2009).

Exercise of agency

Although not always explicit, some children exercised some form of agency in the performance of their activity, which sometimes involves contesting social norms. This agency can take a number of different forms. First is active resistance, which was most markedly exercised by male children, usually for tasks that were perceived as being tedious or too time consuming. Beating, insults and denial of food are some of the punitive measures instituted by adults to mitigate resistance and/or ensure compliance, as this parent indicates:

The boys are too stubborn and would not mind even if they are called to work in the house. They prefer to play and be beaten. If you give birth to a male, you are in trouble. They are all stubborn.

[Female parent, 42 years, peri-urban, coastal zone]

Girls were less likely to refuse directly to undertake tasks, perhaps because of cultural conditioning to accept a lot of domestic tasks (see UNICEF, 1997). Some girls explained the reason they found it difficult to play:

I don’t play at home. I only play when I come to school. I am always busy at home. After school, I fetch water and cook. Before
I complete my chores, it’s almost dark. At weekends and vacations we go to farm during the day.
[Female, 12 years, rural, forest zone]

I don’t have time to play. I am always busy in the house or in the farm or at the market. The little time I get is in the evening when I am about to sleep and I use that to learn too.
[Female, 14 years, rural, coastal zone]

A second form of agency exercised by children in relation to work was rearrangement. Some children rearranged with other siblings to help or perform tasks on their behalf to enable the child who initiated the rearrangement to go and play with other children. In some cases incentives such as a portion of food were used to achieve such an objective. Older male children especially in the coastal zone often exercised this form of agency.

Thirdly, some children mitigated workloads by doing tasks in groups. Group work took two forms. The first was that children intending to play at a certain time would agree to perform a particular task together in their respective household. Sometimes fetching water was arranged this way. The second form of group work was when friends of a child agree to help perform a task such as carrying loads, weeding, etc. In most cases the child who was helped was either a group leader or someone who owned a football or bicycle which was used by group members at play.

Finally, some children used ‘delay tactics’; intentionally loitering or delaying coming home from school, church, errand, etc to avoid certain types of tasks. Others would play before coming home because some did not have the opportunity to play at home. One boy who used this approach said that:

I hardly play while fetching water in the morning because I could be late for school. But in the evening we play football at the bank of the river when asked to fetch water. Also, during Saturdays and Sundays we go to play with the pretence of going to fetch water.
[Male, 12 years, peri-urban, coastal zone]

As well as exercising agency to resist (overtly or otherwise) adult-directed tasks, other children made active and strategic choices, sometimes unbeknown to their parents/guardians, to undertake certain activities, usually economic enterprises. These included hunting, weeding, porterage of farm products such as charcoal, firewood and other foodstuffs for economic benefits. Cash benefits accrued from such ventures were used to purchase some preferred foods, school items or...
footballs. Male children were most often involved in such activities usually in a group, especially during the major farming season.

**Discussion**

Children’s work and leisure activities have potentially important impacts on their physical, social and mental wellbeing. Children’s work is economically and culturally important in Ghana. As Fyfe (1989) has asserted, child’s work as physical and mental involvement in a family or social activity can provide the child with a platform for a gradual initiation into adulthood. However, there can be tensions between this and other aspects of children’s wellbeing, as well as with some legislative frameworks.

The context and practice of children’s work need to be interrogated further in contemporary Ghana. We suggest that children should be engaged to discuss their physical, social and mental needs with influential adults as prescribed by The Children’s Act, 1998 (Act 560) of Ghana and the Human Rights Act of 1998. If children participate and discuss such needs with adults, it may help both parties to understand each other’s needs. This may not only fulfil demands of existing legal frameworks but also address issues that children could not openly express them to adults.

Danger and risks associated with children’s work also merit discussion. The exposure to dangerous animals and vehicles as well as physical injuries associated with certain tasks such as economic enterprises is inimical to the mental and physical health of children. Though physical injuries were often dealt with, no mention was made about how children’s psychological traumas were addressed. Perhaps, children do not report it or parents do not see it as an issue. Whichever the case may be, mental health of children is as important as their physical health (World Health Organisation, 2005).

Also crucial are the issues of child rights and agency. Rights of children are, to a large extent, embedded in the culture of a given group. Thus, rights to leisure, ‘formal’ education and other associated rights are not universal in their practice, but are culturally mediated. In Ghana, the process of child socialisation by adults often gives little or no room for children to freely express their perspectives about activities they engage in, or appropriate means of exercising agency about their work in ways that are acceptable to adults. Cultural relativism is thus an appropriate lens through which to study children’s work in this and other contexts.
There are also a number of issues regarding the level of parents’/guardians’ knowledge about the current and future needs of their children, and also legal frameworks, departments and agencies responsible for child welfare that need to be explored further. Such knowledge can help to inform parents and other key adults in understanding childhood issues generally, and how/why children may adopt certain forms of agency to resist some activities imposed on them. Developing effective agency is a crucial part of growing up. Parents and guardians should not see children’s agency within this context as inherently threatening. Rather they should create appropriate platforms for children to express themselves freely and willingly for amicable cooperation. This might help to avoid the perception of ‘stubbornness’ (Santrock, 2005).

It should also be highlighted that children enjoy certain tasks for various reasons. Even those that are associated with fear and difficulty such as fetching water from the riverside, are enjoyed by some children to an extent, because they get access to play while performing the task. Knowledge about these is important because it provides a clue to guardians about children’s interests, which, when developed, will benefit the child and the broader household and community.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

Children’s activities are varied and contingent. Studies into child issues, especially in developing countries show variation in how such communities conceptualise childhood, which is highly culturally contingent. These influence the employment of children for different tasks. This variability makes it difficult to prescribe a standard set of guidelines for children’s work. However, such tasks need to be carefully evaluated with the children. This would serve as a platform for children’s voices to be heard, at least at the household level.

Children’s work and happiness are both complementary and in tension. Whereas some work activities provide avenues for children to learn basic skills useful in their development and as a source of happiness, other tasks compete with the space of schoolwork and play. Though none can be ignored, each must focus on the best interests of the child which is the prime consideration and focus of all legislations regarding children. There is therefore the need for governmental agencies and departments, as well as other non-governmental organisations to intensify civic education on this subject.

**References**


