

CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES: AN AFRO-CENTRIC PERSPECTIVE ON CHILD LABOUR

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Abstract

Although a number of researchers analysed the exploitative nature of child labour, its contextual basis appears to be down played. The views expressed in these studies are essentially Eurocentric; given the non-recognition of the African centred approach to child labour, and the non-reflection on the social and cultural norms of the people as a base to understand the notion of childhood and children's work experiences. In response to this gap, this present study underscores the way in which the contextual meaning of childhood sharpens the arguments about the notion of child labour. As well as how child labour or work is defined or highlighted, attention was also given to the societal scopes of family and children's livelihoods as covering different and interconnected dimensions. It applied the Afrocentric perspective to describe the conceptualization of child labour in the African context; as it discusses the work-free childhood construct that children's involvement in work is not problematic. Efforts to determine the link between that which is universal and local in childhood experiences and participation in work activities is centred on the social and cultural definitions of child labour. The exploration of how societal values and attitude regarding children's involvement in work could possibly explain the complex interactions of variables that influences child labour.

Key words: *childhood; child labour; child work; afro-centric; Africa centred; socio-cultural*

INTRODUCTION

Child labour in Africa is not only a prevalent phenomenon, but also a considerable challenge. While children are often found working, their undertakings seem extensive in different ways, resulting in various constructions of child labour (Ennew et al. 2005). The analysis of childhood and children's work as elucidated in this study affirms intricate debates regarding the need for children to work or not, and the work that is considered suitable or not. The notion of child labour is combative; this is not only because a number of children work; but because their work simultaneously

involves actual realities of survival, socialisation, participation, abuse and exploitation (Invernizzi 2003, Abebe 2009). Research pinpoints perspectives of childhood and how the phenomenon of child labour should be understood and tackled, each considering the particular perception of children's experiences and childhood (Abebe 2009).

This study analyses Afrocentric debates concerning child labour in the African context as it discusses the work-free childhood construct that children's involvement in work is not problematic. Children's work is related to the perception of them being competent, helpless or vulnerable individuals, and to their

varying economic roles (Bass 2004, Ennew et al. 2005, Bourdillon 2006). In addition, it draws out the controversies underpinning child labour and the conceptualization of children's creative involvement in light of the transforming socio-cultural and economic contexts (Abebe 2009). Moreover, the ways in which different contestation of 'work and labour' are linked to the understanding of childhood, the kind of work children can be engaged in, and how childhood should be, broaden these arguments.

Understanding of childhood and work experiences

Childhood is a distinct phase in the human life cycle; hence it is important to study children and their experiences of work (Bourdillon 2000). Discourse on the nature and understanding of childhood as a social phenomenon and children's lives and position in the society, explore the various ways children interact, inform and shape their lives and their world (Boyden 1990). Significant to this present study is the construction of childhood. As a consequence, Corsaro (2014) indicates that attention has to be paid to the ways that social and cultural constructions of childhood interact in the participation of children in work, in order to obtain insight into their contextual experiences. It would seem that the notion of childhood connotes different meanings to various people in different social, cultural and historical settings (Cree 2010). Thus, the experiences of childhood and work differ between children in different societies (Okoli 2009) and even among children within the same cultural milieu. Equally, factors such as class, ethnicity, gender, ability and age (James et al. 1998), family background, position in family, educational status, religious practices and traditional customs affect experiences and perceptions of childhoods (Morrow 2003). Correspondingly, childhood is generally recognised as "a period between birth and the age when a child is completely matured to take care of him or herself" (Liebel 2004, p. 9).

According to Stephens (1995), childhood is a period when a child ought to be separated from work responsibilities. In some instances, childhood is perceived as a "transitory stage of development that ranges from a state of total dependence, to the level of independence, as

children increasingly acquire competences" (Bourdillon 2000, p. 20). Moreover, research by Boyden (1990) compares childhood with adult life and its tasks. This sees childhood as a period of inexperience, innocence and passive learning from adults. Considering this view, work is seen as an adult activity and children are seen as incompetent, different to adults and lying outside of the adult world of work and economics (Bourdillon 2000). However, Cree (2010) contends this notion of childhood, given that it does not explain the actualities of children and their experiences. Children have a variety of potentials and competencies and are not only receptive of life and culture. Woodhead, as cited in Okoli (2009, p. 42), corroborates that "children as active agents belong to the same world of economics as adults; they can negotiate relationships, make decisions and influence situations in which they live and grow".

The way in which childhood is conceptualised influences the way in which children are regarded, and therefore, whether they should participate in labour ventures or not. It is thus imperative, when considering children's involvement in work, to reflect on adults' notions of childhood and the influences on child rearing practices (Corsaro 2014). It is likely that parents' or guardians' perceptions of childhood may be influential in allowing children to be involved in labour activities. The perception of childhood and child labour experiences can reflect the underlying child work notions of a society or culture (Asante 2009). Given that the basic assumptions of a people are shaped remarkably by their societal beliefs, the understanding of child labour in the African context can be described as affirming the cultural premises of the people. Since people of different descents and their respective cultural backgrounds, are significant in determining experiences in their society (Schiele 2015), it can be argued that the childhood and work experiences of children confirms an Afrocentric orientation to work.

While the term "Afrocentric" is rarely used to portray child labour in the African context, considerable attention in humanities literature has been devoted to its features (such as the cultural beliefs of childhood and children's training through involvement in work) (Nieuwenhuys 1994, Bourdillon

2006, Ntarangwi 2014). Furthermore, efforts have been aimed at showing how policy has affected people of different colour, but seldom represent the cultural or worldviews of people of colour (Schiele 2015), which is used as a conceptual foundation to describe the Afro-centric understanding of child labour (Okoli 2009). It is in response to this gap that this study draws on the worldview of the Afro-centric approach and compares it with a Euro-centric viewpoint of childhood and child labour. Hence the notion of what constitutes child labour depends on the meaning children, their parents or guardians and others in their social environment ascribe to child labour. The various definitions of child labour, as distinguished from child work, are explored in the section below.

Differentiating between child labour and child work

The manner in which child work and labour are defined influences social views on the subject. This in turn determines whether children themselves (and their parents or guardians) define child work as child labour, and whether they continue to request assistance as training or to ameliorate their situation or not. Definitional interpretations are also crucial because they influence how research, policy, programmes and interventions are formulated. Child labour is sometimes used synonymously or confused with child work, but the two terms are not the same. UNICEF (2006) points out that work as an activity may not always be harmful to children, but may have the possibility of lessening or improving children's development, depending on the type, nature and conditions under which it is carried out. In addition, Liebel (2004) affirms that child work can be good or bad, healthy or harmful, but there is a need to distinguish child work from child labour.

Child work is an activity performed by children, in which the key focus is on learning, training and socialisation. ILO (2007, p. 3) maintains that "specific activities performed by children of at least 12 or 13 years of age; which are not harmful to their health and development; not exceeding 14 hours per week can be classified as child work". Bourdillon (2000) differentiates the two terms, positing that child work does not preclude children from other activities such as education, play

and leisure. In contrast, child labour includes activities that damage the well-being and development of children by impeding access to rights such as education (Bourdillon 2000). In this context, child work involves activities that contribute to children's learning and do not constitute threats to their well-being. Consequently, any tasks that jeopardise children's health, deny instructional learning, are exhausting and exploitative are regarded as child labour.

Child labour is a term used to summarise a range of activities performed by children for long hours that are detrimental to their development, health and education. In addition, ILO (2010) points out that such work includes all activities children carry out in both the formal and informal economy, inside and outside family settings, work for socialization, for pay or profit (part-time or full-time). The ILO (2007, p. 28) continues to state that "whether or not particular forms of work can be called child labour depends on the child's age, the type and hours of work performed and the conditions under which it is performed". Any activity carried out by children that involve working for long hours, which may be under harmful conditions, that deprives them of the freedom to play and rest and time for education is considered child labour. UNICEF (2006) suggests that child labour is a broad term used to describe all forms of work that surpass a certain number of hours, for example, children aged 5 to 11 working for even one hour of paid work per day, or 28 hours of household chores a week. This is the same when children aged 12 to 14 perform more than four hours of paid work per day or 42 hours of paid work and domestic chores weekly.

Child labour, in contrast to child work, is tantamount to the exploitation of children. In this study, child labour is defined as activities performed by children between the ages of 7 and 14 years for long hours under hazardous conditions that are detrimental to their health and could hinder their development. Hence, the socio-cultural perspective seeks to provide a significant explanation of the phenomenon of child labour.

The socio-cultural context of child labour

What exacerbates the phenomenon of child labour is the continuing complexity in the

definition of what child work and child labour entails within and across cultures in various parts of the world (Richter et al. 2004). Given the childhood experiences and background of child workers, researchers posit that children's engagement in work has socio-cultural meaning and contexts (James et al. 1998, Abebe 2009). Significant in considering the socio-cultural context of child labour is the need to determine the social structures, norms, values, culture, institutional patterns and interactions in the explanations of child labour. Hence, irrespective of the prohibition of child labour as stipulated in the UNCRC (1989), there is considerable cross national and cultural variation in the standards of child rearing and the approaches that constitute child labour. Efforts to determine the link between that which is universal and local in childhood experience are centred on the cultural definitions of child labour. The exploration of societal values and attitude regarding children's involvement in work activities could possibly explain the complex interactions of variables that influence child labour.

Moreover, knowing about the difference in interpersonal and family dynamics within socio-cultural contexts is important; as the phenomenon is likely to be linked to patterns of behaviours and beliefs considered by different individuals and societies to be traditional or normal (Richter et al. 2004). For most societies in the African context, children are gifts from God, and it is the duty of members of the society to nurture and ensure their wellness (Okoli 2009). The cultural view of child labour includes a set of community beliefs, ideas moral values and a collection of standard norms adopted by individual members to shape a particular lifestyle involving children (Thompson, 1986). The notion of child labour depends upon a cultural definition of what constitutes child labour and everyday activities, as views of a particular group tend to differ in the way child labour is perceived. Hence, Abebe (2009) suggests that children's work is inseparably linked to the social and cultural context in which it takes place.

Nieuwenhuys (1994) indicates that child labour needs to be viewed in terms of the varying material and cultural conditions of the children involved. As a consequence, any

attempt to separate children from work is not cultural, as the participation of children in work activities is considered a vital aspect of their daily living and indispensable to their household survival. Hence work is performed as an initiation into adulthood, whilst engagement in work activities is considered a domain for growth. Ennew et al. (2005) argue that children have the right to benefit from work appropriate to their age, and children are often maltreated rather than sheltered by not being allowed to work. From working, children earn the income required for food, clothing and other housing essentials (Bass 2004).

Rather than work being a hindrance to children's education, the income derived from it is crucial for the payment of school fees, buying of uniforms and other schooling costs (Bourdillon 2006). However, research by Nieuwenhuys (1994) claims that schooling has not reduced children's work but has simply added to their duties and responsibilities. Working children find friends, skills and lessons on how to look after themselves that they may not learn from schooling (Liebel 2004). This socio-cultural context of work emphasizes that "childhood is continuous unto the adult world, with children gradually moving into the activities of adults as their competencies develop and as opportunities arise" (Bourdillon 2006, p. 1202). Work is taken as necessary in the transition into adulthood and engagement in income earning activities has an increasing sphere in their lives.

Afro-centric approach to child labour

In the past decades, African researchers have increasingly recognized the hegemony of Eurocentric to child labour issues specifically in the African society (Asante 1990, Schiele 1996, Asante 2009, Abebe and Bessel 2011). Researchers recognise that child labour is a complex issue within diverse contexts (Betcherman et al. 2004). Hence, different approaches exist towards child labour, such as Euro-centric and Afro-centric or African-centred. Abebe (2009, p. 12) indicates that "each of the approaches uses different paradigms to understand childhood and how the phenomenon of child labour can be tackled". The Euro-centric approach, with its roots in Europe and America, explains issues

in terms of the identity, values and experiences of the West (Bass 2004). This approach does not support children being engaged in work but indicates that they are to be “protected and safeguarded” from exploitation. Implying that, this perspective articulates situations in the foreground of predominated events. It emphasizes that child labour has its roots within the social domains of a society and it occurs due to inadequate societal concern for children. However, the Euro-centric approach has been widely criticised for “ignoring and displacing traditional values of indigenous people and forcing structures on them” (Shahadah 2005, p. 20).

For the purpose of this study, the contention against children’s experiences of work activities or income generation for any purpose, with its additional feature of dependence, is seen as the quintessence of the Eurocentric approach. Hence, proponents of the Afrocentric approach argue that this focus on individualism has led to undue disparity and exploitation and has diminished the worldviews of people generally and in particular the people of African descent (Asante, 1990, Akbar 1994). Given that the “Afrocentrists are particularly concerned with the political and economic effects of Eurocentric cultural hegemony on the people of African descent; considerable attention is focused on the Afrocentric standpoint” (Schiele 2015, p. 23). Considering universalization as deleterious to the illustration of social science paradigms, researchers have attempted to contest Eurocentric domination by constructing conceptual paradigms that affirm the traditions, beliefs and visions of people of African descent (Akbar 1994, Ogbonnaya 1994). This approach seeks to contextualize children’s work as connected to the socio-cultural background of the children or cultural milieu of people of African descent (Asante 1990). This is because it perceives children’s engagement in labour activities as attaining independence and training to adulthood (Bourdillon 2006).

The Afro-centric framing of practices in relation to children is built upon the idea that “appreciation of African local knowledge” and experiences are important (Ntarangwi 2014, p. 5). Research conducted by Ntarangwi (2014) states further that the Western approach to

studying issues concerning Africa must be carefully examined before being applied to Africa. An Afro-centric approach asserts that child labour has to be understood within the context of the conventional situations of Africans (Okoli 2009). The meanings and connotations of child labour may be different to a Euro-centric approach and context. Any effort to obstruct children from performing work is considered by some as Euro-centric and inconsiderate to their cultural context (Abebe and Bessel 2011). Therefore, the Afro-centric perspective holds that child work is required to prepare the child for future challenges (James et al. 1998). The Afro-centric paradigm contests the Euro-American views of child upbringing and child work, which hold that children should be detached fully from work (Stephens 1995). It challenges the Western views on childhood and children’s work and questions the relevance of the claim of Eurocentric perspective in interpreting the ethos of the people of African descent and cultures (Akbar 1994).

The perspective enables an exploration of some basic assumptions in relation to certain child-rearing practices and to adults’ expectations of children (in relation to work), which may be deemed exploitative in some contexts but accepted as part of children’s socialization in others (Okoli 2009). In the light of this argument, children’s participation in work or labour activities is assumed as an essential part of childhood in the Afro-centric approach. Asante (2009) argues that using a European viewpoint to describe the ethos of the African people in relation to child labour is unacceptable. This paradigm holds that the way of life of the African people is different from that of Euro-Americans or Westerners. Studies indicate that children are relevant in the social order of the community and hence, have the obligation to supplement family livelihoods through their routine work activities (Ogbonnaya 1994, Invernizzi 2003, Bass 2004). Such an approach puts forward that children’s engagement in child labour is connected to the socio-economic background in which labour is undertaken and perceives it as basic to the existence of children and to their daily means of support (Bourdillon 2006). In essence, this approach supposes that work performed by children prepares them for the

challenges of adult life and is a necessity of the socio-economic circumstances in which poor people in Africa find themselves.

Afrocentrists assert that while it is important to recognize the nature of childhood among people of African descent, it is more imperative to emphasize the cultural commonalities of children's work experiences if child labour in the African context is to be understood (Asante 1990, Ogbonnaya 1994, Okoli 2009). As a consequence, the Afrocentric standpoint stemmed from common cultural themes of traditional Africa and is thought to be helpful in understanding childhood and work experiences of people of African descent; and also for facilitating adequate social change and well-being for all (Akbar 1994, Schiele 2015). The Afro-centric approach supports the view of children's participation in labour to assist themselves and their families. Bourdillon (2006) indicates that responses and interventions for children involved in child labour ought to depend on the assessment of the circumstances or context under which children work. The approach offers a foundation for the advancement of a different paradigm of child labour beside the Eurocentric spheres (Asante 2009, Ntarangwi 2014).

Generally, studies are in agreement with this view that in many situations it is perceived that children have a responsibility to support the family, a responsibility, which can involve training, as some children work as a preparation for later life challenges. However, irrespective of the Afro-centric understanding of child labour, research has argued that the focus need not only be on the rewards accruing from child labour and a disregard for the manipulative and harmful effects (Nieuwenhuys 1994). Betcherman et al. (2004) confirm that although the Afro-centric approach plainly establishes the benefits that children could acquire from child labour, there are also sufficient indications of harm and maltreatment due to the activities. Other researchers such as Abebe and Bessel (2011) claim that child labour ought not to be responded to in an emotional way on the basis of training, as the negative effects outweigh the benefits in most circumstances, particularly when children are not assisted. In the light of the obvious complexities of child labour, the present research argues that the possible

influences and abuses should not, and cannot, be ignored, hence the need for a social welfare perspective to enable appropriate response to child labour.

Understanding the contextual factors from an Afrocentric perspective that contribute to the engagement of children in work activities in the African context is imperative for the development of appropriate strategies to facilitate children's emancipation from child labour. Afrocentrists acknowledged the Eurocentric approach as the key reason for the lack of care for children's well-being and argues that social welfare policies and interventions based on Afrocentric perceptions could foster greater societal equitable distributions of resources and care for children and their families (Schiele 2015).

CONCLUSION

This study highlighted that childhood and children's work experiences can be understood with regard to social, cultural and economic influences, which are linked in the African context. It is not only how child labour or work is defined that has been underscored. There is the need to excessively reflect on child labour as good or bad, acceptable or not; and to examine and understand the vastly identified circumstances in which children's work occurs.

In a number of contexts, children work due to overwhelming circumstances, whether they are encouraged to do so or decide themselves, hence, what ought to be examined is the circumstances in which child work becomes detrimental to the child's well-being. This entails giving attention to the types, nature and conditions of children's work. In addition is the focus on the distinction of viewpoints on how the understanding and meanings of work and childhood experiences reflect social, cultural and economic changes and differences in different contexts. This present research underscored that the value of child labour is contextual, given that the work experiences of children differ across families, cultures, societies and eras. Therefore, an all-inclusive consideration is crucial in gaining an understanding of child labour in all contexts worldwide.

In conclusion, the Afrocentric perspective on child labour identifies the notion of children's work as linked with economic, social, cultural transformation, geographical construction, and how it becomes either rewarding or exploitative. Therefore, while it is vital to view child labour from different perspectives, it is required to consider these thoughts within the multifaceted social and

cultural practices of the connected histories and geographies in which children's and family's livelihoods continue to unfold.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has no conflict of interest to disclose.

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