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Working School Children in a Nigerian Community: Revisiting the Issues

Abstract

Purpose: The prevalence, risk factors and effects of work on school performance and health consequences of child labour among school children in a rapidly urbanising community in south west Nigeria was assessed.

Methods: A descriptive cross-sectional study of 386 Junior Secondary School students was conducted. Questionnaires were used to obtain information on the students' socio-demographic characteristics, history of child labour activities, and recent history of illness. The academic records of the students were also reviewed.

Results: The prevalence of child labour was 72.5%, the median number of hours spent working per week was 18 hours (range 2- 56 hours). The main reason for working was to augment the family income (37.6%). Child labour was commoner among those: whose mothers were not educated; who had four to eight siblings, and who had a working sibling. Higher proportions of working children had repeated a class and had failed the previous term's examinations. More of the working children reported being ill and injured in the previous term.

Conclusion: Child labour is quite common in this area and is associated with negative academic and health outcomes. Multidisciplinary programmes targeted at reducing the practice should be developed.

Keywords: Child labour, secondary school students, south west Nigeria

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Introduction

Every child has the right to health and education [1]. Yet each year, millions of under aged children around the world are engaged in renumerated or unremunerated work, leading to the impairment of their personal development and safety and often affecting also the physical and mental well being [2]. Child labour which is defined as the admission to employment of a child, who is still within the age of compulsory school education [3], still remains a huge global problem which has precipitated an intense debate in the past few decades.

Child labour is a global phenomenon occurring in both developing and developed countries of the world. Estimates indicate that about 353 million children are engaged in some form of economic activity globally, most of whom are in Asia, the Pacific and Africa [4]. The International Labour Organization reports that about 120 million children are fully working in developing countries, while 250 million are working and schooling concurrently [5]. Most of these children are employed for long hours and paid low wages. Currently, in most African countries the prevalence of child labour ranges from 20% to 54% [4, 6].

Poverty is the greatest single force which creates the flow of children into the workplace. Studies have shown that child labour is more frequent in poorer households and in communities with high economic inequalities[7-9]. Working children have been shown to contribute up to 90% of the family income and many children who work do so as a means of survival [10].

Despite the scale of the problem and an increasing awareness of its high social costs the prevention of child labour is often not a political priority in most developing countries including Nigeria. As a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child the Federal Government of Nigeria has recently put in place substantial legislation against child labour. The Nigerian government has also formally adopted the International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions setting a minimum age for the employment and also the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC). Some states in the country such as Anambra State have gone further to ban children from working during school hours [3]. Nevertheless the legal enforcement of these legislations remains another challenge to be met. The relative lack of political will has been exacerbated partly by a lack of understanding of the health impacts and the burden of child labour on society and also from the wide disagreement on how to tackle the problem of child labour. Generally there have been two schools of thought. One view is that child labour is detrimental to the child, the household and even the country's human capital development [4,11]. The other is that child labour is not necessarily harmful to the child, provided that it is not undertaken at the expense of the child's schooling [8,12].

It is apparent that child labour like any other public health problem requires epidemiological information to establish the extent of the problem among in-school children and its effects. The information would be useful for developing and implementing appropriate strategies to prevent the problem. This study therefore aimed to assess how often and for what reasons child labour occurs in this rapidly urbanising community in south west Nigeria, including the risk and protective factors, and other health consequences linked to child labour.

Methods

The study was conducted in Igbo-Ora, a small town located in Oyo State in southwestern Nigeria. It is the larger of the two towns in Ibarapa Central Local Government and it is the headquarters of the Local Government Area. The town is located about 100km from Ibadan with an estimated population of 80,000 people as at 2006 [13]. The predominant occupations of the residents are subsistence farming and petty trading.

A descriptive cross-sectional study of students in Junior Secondary School (JSS) classes one to three was carried out. The sample size was estimated using the Kish and Leslie formula for population surveys. Using a child labour prevalence of 50.3% obtained by Fetuga ,among junior secondary students in Sagamu, Nigeria [10] at a level of precision of 5% a minimum sample size of 384 was obtained. Sampling was conducted in two stages; the first stage involved selection of three out of the six secondary schools in Igbo-Ora community by balloting. In the second stage one arm of each class from JSS 1 to JSS3 was selected also by balloting. Thus a total of nine classes were selected, all the students in the selected classes were interviewed.

A structured pre-tested interviewer administered questionnaire was used to obtain information on the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, their family characteristics, labour activities, and the effects on their health and education. The questionnaire had been translated to Yoruba the local language and back translated to English to ensure that the original meaning was retained. Questionnaires were administered in Yoruba by thirteen trained research assistants. The students' examination records for the previous school term were retrieved from the class teachers' records and grades were computed for the thirteen subjects done, the average score was used as each child's grade. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Local Government Education Authority and from the secondary school administrators.

Data was analyzed using the SPSS version 15.0 software. The statistical significance of observed associations between categorical variables was examined using the Chi Square Test at a level of significance of 5%. Variables significant at 10% on bivariate were included in the logistic regression analysis to determine the significant predictors of child labour.

Results

Characteristics of respondents and prevalence of child labour

A total of 386 students responded to the survey, 334 (86.5%) were aged 13-15 years**,** 224 (58.0%) were female, 382 (99.0%) were of Yoruba ethnicity and most 295 (79.5%) lived with their parents. More than half of the children, 201 (53.6%) were from polygamous homes (Table 1).

Almost half of the respondents' fathers 167 (43.3%) and mothers 178 (46.1%) had attained secondary level of education. The majority, 81.1%, of the students' mothers were traders, while 31.9% and 22.0% of the fathers were traders and farmers respectively.

The prevalence of child labour among the students was 280 (72.5%) and the majority

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of students and parents

Characteristics	n (%)
Age (Years)	
10-12	52 (13.5)
13-15	334 (86.5)
Sex	
Male	162 (42.0)
Female	224 (58.0)
Tribe	
Yoruba	382 (99.0)
Non- Yoruba	4 (1.0)
Child resides with	
Both parents	251 (65.1)
One parent	61 (15.8)
Others (Grandmother, Uncle, Aunt, Sibling)	74 (19.2)
Type of family	
Monogamous	179 (46.4)
Polygamous	207 (53.6)
Maternal Education	
None	77 (19.9)
Primary	104 (26.9)
Secondary	167 (43.4)
Tertiary	38 (9.8)
Maternal Occupation	
Trading	22 (81.1)
Farming	14 (5.7)
Artisans	31 (3.6)
Civil Servant	313 (8.0)
Unemployed/ Retired	6 (1.6)
Paternal Education	
None	66 (17.1)
Primary	103 (24.1)
Secondary	178 (46.1)
Tertiary	49 (12,7)
Paternal Occupation	
Trading	85 (31.9)
Farming	87 (22.0)
Artisans	68 (19.9)
Civil Servant	123 (17.6)
Unemployed/ Retired	33 (1.6)

(65.7%) of the working children worked in their parents' shops or as assistants in the family business. Slightly over a quarter 78 (27.9%) child workers were street hawkers and 18 (6.4%) worked as farm hands. Majority, 270 (96.5%) of the children involved in economic activities did so after school. The median number of hours spent working per week was 18 hours (range 2-56 hours) and the median number of years they had been working for was 3 years with a range of

1-9 years. Majority, 227 (82.1%) were introduced to the work by their parents and 137(49.6%) of the working children also had siblings who worked. Majority (75.4%) of these working children claimed they enjoyed the work (Table 2).

Table 2: Pattern of child labour among students

Characteristics	n (%)
Engaged in child labour	
Yes	280 (72.5)
No	106 (27.5)
Kind of work	
Helping in the family	184(65.7)
trade/shop	78 (27.9)
Street hawking	18 (6.4)
Farming	
Time of work	
Before School	12 (4.2)
After School	268 (95.8)
Hours spent on job/week	
<10	52 (18.6)
10-19	106 (37.9)
20-29	72 (25.7)
30-39	27 (9.6)
≥ 40	23 (8.2)
Years spent on job	
<2	134 (47.9)
2-5	108 (38.5)
>5	38 (13.6)
Who introduced work	
Self	37 (13.1)
Parents	230 (82.1)
Others	13 (4.8)
Siblings work	
Yes	139 (49.6)
No	141 (50.4)
Enjoys the work	
Yes	210 (75.4)
No	70 (24.6)

The reasons given by the child for being engaged in economic activities were to: augment the family income, 104 (37.6%); enhance sales in the family shop 39 (14.1%); prevent idleness 38 (13.8%); and obey parents' instruction 30 (10.7%). The median daily income generated by these children from their economic activities was about $3.00 (range 30 cents- $20). Majority, 170 (60.7%) reported that they were given some money as payment. The median daily earning was 30 cents (range 10 cents -$1.30). This money was most often spent on their personal needs 122 (72.6%).

Socio-demographic characteristics and child labour

As shown in Table 3, slightly higher proportions of male students (74.1%) , those who were: aged 10-12 years (73.6%); not living with their parents (72.6%); and from polygamous homes (71.1%) were engaged in child labour activities. However, the differences were not statistically significant. The proportion of working children increased from 59.4% in homes with four children or less to 82% in homes with 10 children or more ($p<0.05$). Furthermore, those children who had siblings who were working were more likely to be involved in economic activities compared to those who did not have working siblings (94.2% versus 78.9% ($p<0.05$).

Table 3: Socio-demographic characteristics of students and prevalence of child labour

Characteristics	Child labour		p-value
	Yes (n, %)	No (n, %)	
Age (in years)			
10-12	39 (75.0)	13 (25.0)	0.67
13-15	241 (72.2)	93 (27.8)	
Type of family			
Monogamous	122 (68.2)	57 (31.8)	0.07
Polygamous	158 (76.3)	49 (23.7)	
Living with parents			
Yes	213 (72.2)	82 (27.8)	0.79
No	67 (73.6)	24 (26.4)	
Number of children in the home			
<5	82 (59.4)	56 (40.6)	
5-9	157 (79.3)	41 (20.7)	<0.001*
>10	41 (82.0)	9 (18.0)	
Working sibling N=297			
Yes	129 (94.2)	8 (5.8)	<0.001*
No	127 (78.9)	34 (21.1)	

*p-value significant

Maternal occupation and educational level were significantly associated with child labour. A significantly higher proportion of children,

81.8%, whose mothers were farmers were engaged in child labour compared with 58.1% and 35.7% of children of civil servants and artisans respectively. Similarly higher proportions of children whose mothers had no formal education (81.8%) were engaged in child labour compared with 70.1% and 55.3% of children of mothers who had secondary and tertiary education respectively ($p< 0.05$). However, neither the fathers' educational attainment nor their occupation was significantly associated with the prevalence of child labour ($p>0.05$).

Effects of child labour

The academic records of the respondents for the term prior to the survey were reviewed and the students were requested to provide information on absence from school, repetition of a class due to failure, occurrence of illness, assault and injury. As shown in Table 4 working children were more likely to have been absent from school (12.5%) compared with 1.8% of their counter-parts. Similarly, 21.1% of the working children had repeated a class compared with 9.4% of children who were not working. A higher proportion of the working children (80.7%) obtained overall scores below 50% in the previous term's examinations compared with 61.3% of the non-working children, ($p<0.05$). The incidence of injuries was also significantly higher among the working children (18.2%) compared with the non-working children (0.9%). The incidence of physical assault was also significantly higher among the working children, ($p<0.05$). Moreover, a significantly higher proportion of children who worked 82 (29.3%) reported having been ill during the school term in comparison with 16 (15.1%) of the non-working children ($p<0.05$).

Predictors of Child Labour

The major predictors for the occurrence of child labour are shown in Table 5. Absence or low level of maternal education were found to be a significant predictors for the occurrence of child labour. Children of mothers with no education were the most likely to have children involved in child labour OR 6.75 (95% C.I: 1.52-30.02), $p=0.01$. Furthermore, children who had four to eight siblings were 2.9 times more likely to be working when compared with children with three or less siblings OR 2.86 (95% CI: 1.17-6.99), $p=0.02$. Another major predictor for child labour was the presence of a working sibling: this characteristic increased the likelihood of a child being engaged in child labour by 4.2 times in comparison with others OR 4.151 (CI- 1.79-9.65).

Table 4: Engagement in child labour and health and academic outcomes

Characteristics	Engaged in child labour		p-value
	Yes n (%)	No n (%)	
Ever missed School			
Yes	35 (12.5)	2 (1.8)	<0.001**
No	243 (87.5)	104 (98.2)	
Ever repeated a class			
Yes	59 (21.1)	96 (90.6)	0.008*
No	221 (78.9)	10 (9.4)	
Failed last Examination			
Failed (<50)	226 (80.7)	65 (61.3)	<0.001*
Passed (≥50)	54 (19.3)	41 (38.7)	
Injured			
Yes	51 (18.2)	1 (0.9)	<0.001**
No	229 81.8)	105 (99.1)	
Physically assaulted			
Yes	33 (11.8)	1 (0.9)	<0.001**
No	247 (88.2)	105 (99.1)	
Sexually assaulted			
Yes	9 (3.2)	1 (0.9)	0.189
No	271 (96.8)	105 (99.1)	
Illness during the term			
Yes	82 (29.3)	16 (15.1)	0.004*
No	198 (70.7)	90 (84.9)	

*p-value significant, **Fisher's exact test, significant

Effect of work on child's school performance

Regarding the predictors of poor performance as revealed by the grades in the last examinations, children who had been involved in farming were 2.6 times more likely to have failed in comparison with children who hawked OR 2.63

95% CI: 1.12- 6.19. However, work duration and the number of work hours per week did not significantly affect the child's grades.

Table 5: Predictors of Child labour

Characteristics	Odds ratio	95% CI	p-value
Mother's occupation			
Civil Servants	1		
Farming	1.36	0.10-17.94	0.82
Artisans/trading	0.87	0.23- 3.2	0.84
Unemployed	2.39	0.43- 13.17	0.32
Mother's Education			
None	6.75	1.52-30.02	0.01*
Primary	3.47	1.04-11.62	0.04*
Secondary	3.86	1.31-11.38	0.01*
Tertiary	1		
Type of family			
Monogamy	1		
Polygamy	1.33	0.52-3.40	0.56
Number of children			
1-4	1		
5-9	2.86	1.17-6.99	0.02*
>10	3.17	0.76-13.22	0.11
Working sibling			
No	1		
Yes	4.15	1.79-9.65	0.001*

*p-value significant

Discussion

While children have always worked in Nigeria, the prevalence of child labour observed in this study is quite high. Using the categorization of children less than 15 years of age [14], this study estimated the proportion of in school children engaged in economic activities as 72.5%. Compared to earlier reports [8,10], this prevalence indicates a rise in the proportion of children combining work with schooling, even higher than the prevalence for rural communities where it has been documented that the participation of children in economic activity is highest [8]. This prevalence is also in excess of the average of 40% reported for Africa and definitely higher than the prevalence of working school children in other developing countries such as India [15]. This may be an added indication of the rising poverty levels [16] in the country with the resulting dependence of parents on the added income from working children. However, it could be due to varying definitions of child labour utilised by researchers.

The economic activities of these working children varied but the majority of them were helping in the family business or shop, while about a quarter of the children were street hawking with less than a tenth working on farms. As reported by Fetuga et al in a similar study of schooling children, no child was involved in bonded labour or prostitution [10]. The prevalent forms of occupational activities are contrary to those of other local surveys which have found that working children in rural areas were mostly engaged in activities such as agriculture and hunting, while those in towns were often street traders or apprentices to artisans [17-18]. This could be due to the fact that this is a community that is undergoing urbanization. The median work hours per week was 18 hours similar to reports from Benin city, Nigeria [7]. Some studies consider 20 hours of work per week as the critical threshold beyond which the education of the child starts being significantly affected [19-20]. There was, however, no such evidence in this study.

In agreement with the reports from previous studies[10], most of the children engaged in labour activities worked after school and at the instruction of one or both parents in order to contribute to family income. An important observation was that almost half of these children had siblings who were also engaged in labour activities. This is a further indication that child labour is an established culture in most families in this community.

Although some studies have reported that girls were more often involved in labour activities than boys [17], this study found no such association between child labour and gender of the child. The ages of the working children were also not significantly different from their non working peers. A review of the child labour studies in Nigeria also reports that in terms of gender, there was little or no gender difference between male and female children in work participation across ages [18].

The observation of previous researchers [8,11,21], that children engaged in work may

contribute a significant part of household income also holds true in this work as daily income of up to $20 was reported. The median daily income of $3 effectively puts the individual above the poverty line which is about $1 per day. This monetary gain cannot be ignored and may be a major impetus for continuation of occupational activities [22]. In addition more than half of the children received some part of the earnings which in spite of the paltriness must be significant for the children, as majority reported that such money was kept and spent personally.

Studies have identified parental characteristics as one of the factors influencing the decision of the parents to involve their children in economic activities [12, 15]. As found in other studies [10], the major parental characteristics associated with child employment were lack of maternal education and maternal occupation of farming and also lack of formal employment of mothers. Other studies have also shown that children from households engaged in farming were more likely to participate in economic activity than children from non-farming households. This is expected because farming households are assumed to be poorer and less educated than non-farming households. This may be as a result of the subsistence farming practised commonly in Nigeria which is highly labour intensive, since most farmers are unable to hire labour, they resort to personal engagement and the involvement of their children [8].

Literature has clearly established that children from larger size households are more likely to engage in economic activities [10,23]. The association between large household size and children's occupational activity in this study confirms the findings of earlier studies. The possible explanation for this is that a larger household size reduces the income available for each member of the household, thereby increasing the chances of a child participating in economic activities especially in paid work. The increased risk observed for engagement of children in economic activities in the presence of a working sibling requires more research as such findings have not been documented in other local studies. This relationship could be further explored in future studies.

A major consequence of the concomitant employment of schooling children is the effect on school performance. As shown by previous studies, this study provides further evidence on the negative impact of child labour on educational performance [24-27]. School absenteeism among the working children was significantly higher among children involved in occupational activities. This finding similar to the report of a study conducted in Ogun State by Fetuga et al [17] Furthermore, working children were more likely to have repeated a class and also to have failed the previous term's examinations. Other studies have also found that grade attainment was lower for working children even though school attendance was not significantly affected [15,28-30].

Engagement of children in farming activities has been identified as the major predictor of poor school performance in comparison to other forms of occupational activities. However, the ILO has indicated that children's participation in work that does not adversely affect their health and personal development or interfere with their schooling is generally regarded as being something positive. This form of work includes assisting their parents around the home, assisting in a family business or earning pocket money outside school hours and during school holidays. It becomes obvious then that not all work done by children should be classified as child labour that is to be targeted for elimination. However some work, such as farming, which requires children to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work should be discouraged [31].

Notable also is the fact that those children who worked experienced more episodes of illness during the school term compared with non working children. This finding has also been documented by other researchers [11,15]. Similarly, experiences of injuries, physical or sexual assault however were significantly higher

among children who worked compared with those who did not.

Conclusion

Apparently the engagement of school children in child labour is a common phenomenon is this community. The interplay of poverty and cultural acceptance of this mode of augmenting family income indicate that the elimination of this practice would face fierce community resistance. However, the negative impact of child labour on the health and educational achievement of the affected children cannot be overlooked. Due to the high demands at work and the fact that their studies are inter-spaced with spells of employment these children appear to be faring worse than their counterparts academically. Poor academic performance inevitably leads to poor progress and ultimately to loss of motivation to continue with their education. Such children will thus be confined to low paying jobs as adults which ensures that the cycle of poverty and exploitation continues.

Programmes targeted at reducing this practice should be multi-faceted including poverty eradication schemes, family planning, girl child education and community education on the negative effects of child labour. Furthermore, strategies directed at regulating and monitoring of work hours and types of work done by children engaged in work should be developed.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests associated with work

Authors' contribution

We declare that work was done by all the authors named in this article and all the liabilities pertaining to claims relating to the content of this article will be borne by the authors. Eme Owoaje coordinated the study design and development of the questionnaire and participated in the data analysis and drafted the manuscript. Olusimbo Ige participated in the data analysis and assisted with the drafting of the manuscript. Eniola Bamgboye participated in the study and questionnaire design, helped in the data collection and entry and drafting the manuscript. All the authors read the final manuscript.

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