

Cultural Responsiveness in Child Protection: Stakeholders and Parental Perceptions of Working Children and Culture-appropriate Assessment in Ghana

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Abstract

There is a need to understand cultural responsiveness in the field of child protection and accommodate best interests of the child to local contexts. This research addresses cultural responsiveness in social work interventions as part of child protection services in cases of 'child labour' in rural and urban Ghana. The sample size of this study is sixty participants (thirty men and thirty women), and it is made up of social workers and other child welfare practitioners in government agencies; non-governmental organisations; and parents whose children were involved in child labour as well as parents whose children were not. Using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation as methods of data collection, participants included parents (ten), stakeholders (ten), focus groups (thirty people); and parental interviews in participant observation (ten) were conducted to gather the needed data with purposive sampling across rural and urban communities in Ghana. Applying a framework approach as the main qualitative data analysis approach, interviews were recorded and transcribed. Overall, the research finds that professionals need to immerse themselves in different cultural practices and communication whilst considering different working definitions for parenting and creating a mission and vision statement that embraces different cultures.

Keywords: assessment, best interests of the child, child labour, child protection, cultural responsiveness, UNCRC

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Introduction

In Ghana, children's participation in work is viewed as critical in forming character, discipline and learning the significance of a strong work ethic (Wyness, 2019; Imoh and Okyere, 2020). This normative practice has been going on for generations and is seen by many Ghanaians as helping constructively in the general development of children between the ages of five and seventeen years old since they acquire important skills: learning to work, collaborating with others, becoming contributory citizens and helping shape societies and communities (Adonteng-Kissi, 2018b). Whilst accepting the role of children's work in socialisation and acquiring skills, social workers often face circumstances where a child is overworked with the possibility of harming their health or education. It is therefore essential to answer the research question: to what extent do social workers need to apply cultural responsiveness in social work interventions as part of child protection services in cases of child labour in rural and urban areas in Ghana?

From national and international reporting standpoints, there is a difference between child work and child labour. The legal boundaries that differentiate 'acceptable' child work from child labour are provided by International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 138 (1973). A minimum threshold of thirteen years is set for children participating in light work by the ILO Convention 138 (1973), allowing a specific level of leeway in setting twelve years as a minimum threshold in the developing world. Light work is defined by the ILO in Article 7 as a task that would not be harmful to the health and development of a child and would not obstruct school attendance and participation in vocational education. Child work encompasses all tasks undertaken by children which are not harmful in nature and do not exceed fourteen hours per week (Adonteng-Kissi, 2018a). Work socialisation is children's traditional responsibility to work in the family setting and forms a social welfare service to maintain the family (Gankam Tambo, 2014). Article 31, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, explains it as an aspect of the socialisation and confirmation of solidary community participation.

In contrast, child labour is all work carried out by children that is harmful to their health and development (Dammert *et al.*, 2018). The key ILO (1999) Conventions on the worst form of child labour (WFCL) are enshrined in the WFCL, 1999 (No. 182) and the Convention on the Minimum Age of Employment, 1973 (No. 138). The ILO Convention 182 defines WFCL to mean child abuse and exploitation. Article 3 of ILO No. 182 explains WFCL as all types of slavery or activities such as sale and trafficking of children, slavery and tasks which, by their nature or the conditions in which they are undertaken, have the possibility of

injuring the health, safety or morals of children. There is a problem with applying ILO Convention 138 in a non-contextual manner since the Convention specifies a minimum age for children to perform work regardless of the nature of work. Hence, WFCL is inconsistent with children's rights, and it seems to include a high level of risk that must be eliminated. Usually, eliminating WFCL is inspired by the human rights principle and advocates explicitly raise Articles 3 and 12 of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) to defend eliminating injurious work effectively. Cultural responsiveness, sensitivity and contextualisation in ILO's definition of WFCL are not demonstrated by the ILO Convention 182.

The child welfare system in Ghana is confronted with a huge number of cases of child neglect owing to deprivation and large family size (Frimpong-Manso and Mawudoku, 2017). This is mirrored in the huge number of cases relating to maintenance issues reported to child welfare agencies. The Ghana Police Service reported in 2008 that there were 7,044 cases relating to maintenance (Owusu, 2013). In Ghana, the legal regime on engaging children in hazardous work is focussed on prevention and elimination (Okyere *et al.*, 2021). Article 28 of the 1992 Republican Constitution bars children's engagement in tasks viewed as hazardous to their education, development or health and offers guidelines for promulgating law and policy intended to achieve this goal. Similarly, the Children's Act (1998) (Act 560) was passed with the intent of reforming and consolidating the legislation concerning children, relative to safeguarding children's rights, maintaining and adopting children and regulating child labour and apprenticeships. The definition of a child as specified in Section 1 of this Act is a person below the age of eighteen years. The engagement of children in exploitative labour and hazardous work which is injurious to the health, safety or morals of a person (defined in Section 91 as child labour) is banned by Section 87 of the Act. Additionally, working at night by children (between twenty and six hours) is barred by Section 88, whilst fifteen years is fixed by Sections 89 and 90, respectively, as the minimum age admissible into work and thirteen years as the minimum age admissible into light work. Apart from the Children's Act 560, other laws are intended to deal with banned types of hazardous children's work such as the Human Trafficking Act (Act 694) (2005), the Juvenile Justice Act (2003), the Child Rights Regulations instrument (Legislative Instrument 1705), the Labour Act (Act 651) (2003), Labour Regulations instrument (Legislative Instrument 1833) (2007) and the Education Act (Act 778) (2008). Ghana has designed and implemented the National Plan of Action against Child Labour, Phase 1 (NPA I, 2009–2015) in an effort to prevent and eliminate child labour and the WFCL (Okyere *et al.*, 2021).

Apart from the 1992 Constitution, the prevailing Ghanaian legal regime is not grounded on the Ghanaian cultural, social and political contexts (Okyere *et al.*, 2021). There are individualising and paternalistic

theoretical approaches that are embedded in, and have regulated, child welfare services which are usually replicated in rural and urban-run programmes through reporting, funding and other demands, which may lend themselves to programme-centred instead of comprehensive approaches to child welfare (Libesman, 2013). Decolonising child welfare practice needs insights into the way an enmeshment of government policies forms the basis for current experiences of many local children and families. Nonetheless, integrating culturally responsive services into the Ghanaian child protection system is stalled by professional interests that are generally a feature of largely formalised child protection systems, and the issues of children's rights and the best interests of the child have sharply come into focus (Morris and Burford, 2017; Connolly and Katz, 2019). However, many scholars of cultural relativism rebut the children's rights argument since they believe that the rights of the child are established on Western concepts expressed in Western discourse (Van der Vyver, 2001).

The variations in meaning of the best interests of the child are critical and the belief that there is just one best interests norm in currency is flawed (Parker, 1994). The meaning of people's lives and the type of lifestyle they view as essential or intolerable are culturally dependent. Therefore, the meaning of the concept of quality-of-life is also expected to be culturally dependent. This argument justifies cultural relativism. The Committee on the Rights of the Child plays a critical role in the interpretation of international humanitarian law (IHL). Among the main international human rights instruments with organs providing explanatory notes in monitoring implementation, the UNCRC is the only instrument with prevailing significant jurisprudence on humanitarian law that is openly articulating humanitarian law, via Article 38 of the UNCRC. Furthermore, many IHL instruments have provisions connected to children's protection, permitting considerable intersection. The best interests of the child norm enshrined in Article 3 (1) of the UNCRC forms the basis of international children's rights law and governs all decisions of private or public social welfare services, administrative authorities, courts of law or legislative bodies. In all issues concerning marriage and family relationships, 'the interests of the children shall be paramount' as specified in Article 16 (1)(d) of the same Convention. The Committee on the Rights of the Child's Concluding Observation on the combined third to fifth periodic reports of Ghana (9 June 2015) and associated State Party Report dealt with these concerns. Country-specific concluding observations are also relevant in interpreting the general provisions of the UNCRC. The Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment (GC) No. 17 (2013) and GC No. 14 (2013) elucidate the children's rights as giving primary consideration to the child's best interests (Article 3, paragraph 1) (GC14; Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). GCs are published by the Committee on the Rights of the Child

(the Committee) to offer explanatory notes to interpret and implement the provisions of the UNCRC. Article 31 of the UNCRC acknowledges rights of all children to recreational activities, leisure, rest and play and to free and full participation in artistic and cultural life. Article 31 articulates rights that are interrelated which, although they usually intersect and complement one another, have different features.

The best interests principle has been expressed in other international instruments since 1959 when it was first included in the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (Pădurariu, 2020). It was then mirrored in the document Social and Legal Principles relating to the Protection and Welfare of Children, with Special Reference to Foster Placement and Adoption Nationally and Internationally, in which Article 5 reinforces the principle. Furthermore, it is expressed in the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in which Article 5(b) highlights the principle. Whilst the principle is not explicitly used in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, it has been stated two times by the Committee of Human Rights in its GCs section pointing to ‘the paramount interest of the children’ in matters concerning marriage dissolution (Alston, 1994, p. 4). The jurisprudence under the European Convention on Human Rights and the Human Rights Committee provides the strongest evidence of the principle’s acceptance and frequent usage in the Committee’s consideration of personal communications under the Optional Protocol. In one classic case, the Committee members based their Opinion on what they called the definite right and duty of a national court to determine in the best interests of the child. This principle is expressed in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, Article IV which stipulates that ‘in all actions concerning the child undertaken by any person or authority the best interests of the child shall be the primary consideration’ (Alston, 1994, p. 4). In the arena of refugees, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ Executive Committee has officially highlighted that all decisions concerning refugee children should be governed by the best interests of the child standard and the principle of family unity (UNHCR, 1991).

Theoretical considerations

For social workers, it is helpful to consider the cultural responsiveness and legal principles discussed thus far through the lens of critical theory. Critical theory offers the foundation on which to explore as well as contest the social structures that generate oppression (Green *et al.*, 2016). Empowerment and advocacy are about critical theory, feminist and anti-discrimination standpoints and planning to allow individuals to deal with hindrances to accomplishing life goals and getting access to services.

Whilst radical theory echoes contestation and resistance, other major elements of critical social work dwell on empowerment and feminist perspectives as their approaches. Critical social work explains the necessity to identify the social structures that influence the life experiences of societal members and guides social workers to engage with the most disadvantaged and oppressed in society to ensure social justice and social change (Payne, 2014). Possibly, Fook (2017) offers the most all-inclusive explanation of critical social work.

Characteristics of critical theory, post-structuralism and post-modernism are integrated to reconsider concepts about social work practice in four ways (Payne, 2008). First, critical practice interrogates the source of knowledge and the way it is applied especially by practitioners. Furthermore, Fook (2002) supports a critical-reflexive method, contesting dominance in personal constructions, social relations and social structures. Secondly, one can delve into the issue of wielding power and the way that power is utilised. There is the need for critical social work to analyse and reflect on the power in individuals' circumstances, attempting to reconceptualise it and to negotiate knowledge of new power relations with less possibility to disempower. Thirdly, narrative, language and discourse are critical; therefore, language cannot be viewed as neutral but something that impacts on the way we think and our level of knowledge; the narrative we discuss sometimes selects between probable options, so our discussions influence others to believe that what we utter is true. Fourthly, difference and identity are highlighted, rather than thinking in the context of binaries.

Advocacy takes its origin from legal understanding and skills and includes enhancing social change for groups and advocating independently for people. From a critical viewpoint, empowerment and advocacy, particularly through group work, have the possibility to enhance solidarity and creation of awareness (Mullender and Ward, 1991). Structural definitions of oppression are viewed as essential to opposing discrimination or oppression, these offering a straightforward perspective of the social goals of such theory, whilst sensitivity perspectives pay particular attention to cultural and social interactions as a means of integrating these matters into other perspectives of practice. Anti-discrimination/oppression methodologies highlight the significance of reacting to discrimination and oppression as an integral component of all social work.

It is therefore significant to discuss the overarching research question guiding this research: to what extent do social workers need to apply cultural responsiveness in social work interventions as part of child protection services in cases of child labour in rural and urban areas in Ghana? In answering this question, critical race theory will be used as the framework for data analysis to offer a basis for critiquing the global trends that previously colonised countries have experienced. To deal constructively with the western legacies of oppression, discrimination

and social inequity in the formalised welfare system, social workers must understand the idea of ‘quality-of-life’ in a way that is culturally inclusive and responsive.

Methods

Ethics statement

This research was approved by the Human Ethics Committee of Anonymous University (Application No. 15–002). In respecting the principles of the Anonymous University Ethics Committee, cultural variations were adhered to, and the rights of children were safeguarded before, during and after the research. Every participant provided me with informed and written consent before partaking in the research or in any follow-up activity. Participating in the research was voluntary and participants had the option of withdrawing at any point of the research without penalties. Details of participants and the collected data were stored with complete anonymity.

Research design

A qualitative exploratory approach is appropriate because it allows a detailed exploration of issues. Further, it can offer an in-depth explanation of the lives of participants (Fetterman, 1989; Corbin and Strauss, 2014). The research included in-depth parent and stakeholder interviews, focus groups and participant observation methods for data gathering, and was informed by literature discussing cultural responsiveness in social work interventions as part of child protection services in cases of five- to seventeen-year-old child labourers in rural and urban areas in Ghana. Purposive sampling was used to select sixty participants (thirty men and thirty women) and to recruit a total of ten semi-structured stakeholder interviews with social workers from government departments and non-governmental organisations such as the Anonymous Department; The Anonymous Commission; Anonymous Institute; and the Anonymous Regional Department. The following is the method of data collection as shown in [Table 1](#): Five stakeholders were employed in each of the two areas. I moderated one focus group discussion composed of fifteen participants made up of parents whose children were/were not engaged in child labour in each area. Furthermore, I carried out a total of ten semi-structured interviews with participants whose children were/were not involved in child labour. Last of all, participant observations were conducted to examine the natural working environment of children to place into context the empirical findings, and to allow the matter to be illuminated. Five parents in each of

Table 1. Method of data collection

Methods	Rural area	Urban area	Total
Stakeholder Interviews	Five participants	Five participants	Ten participants
Parental Interviews	Five participants	Five participants	Ten participants
Focus Group Discussions	Fifteen participants	Fifteen participants	Thirty participants
Interviews with participants in Participant Observation	Five participants	Five participants	Ten participants
Total	Thirty participants	Thirty participants	Sixty participants

the two areas made up the participants in the participant observations and were involved in a total of ten semi-structured interviews. As shown in [Figure 1](#) below, the study took place in the following locations: the rural area under research, inhabited predominantly by farmers, comprised Ankaase (population 20, 451), Anwiankwanta (population 29,748) and Kensere (population 15,637) (GSS, 2012), and all are in the Asante Bekwai Municipality. Secondly, the urban area under research, mainly engaged in fishing, included Jamestown (population 16,221), Korle Gonno (population 27,826) and Chorkor (population 23,853) in the Accra Metropolis (GSS, 2012). The sixty participants recruited for the research were made up of parents whose children were engaged in child labour and parents whose children were not. The inclusion criterion for choosing participants for this research was being either a parent or a social worker in child welfare with expert knowledge. Methods section (see [Table 1](#)) included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation.

Data generation activities and data analysis

The interview schedules used in the different techniques comprised the focus groups' interview schedule with thirteen questions; fourteen questions in the parental interview schedule; twenty questions in the stakeholders' interview schedule and twelve questions in the participants' observation interview schedule. Each interview took between thirty and ninety minutes. In the analysis process, the framework technique was applied. The gathered data were scrutinised in line with the main themes at the analysis stage. I then charted and sorted out the data. This covered a five-phase process involving familiarisation; identifying a thematic framework; indexing; charting; and mapping and interpretation ([Spencer et al., 2014](#)). Familiarising myself with the transcripts of the collected data was undertaken to identify the framework of the data collected during the familiarisation process.

In Phase 2, after the emerging themes were identified in the data-set, I identified the thematic framework. These emerging themes could have emerged from a priori themes. Nonetheless, at this phase, the data might direct the themes. At the familiarisation phase, the notes taken were

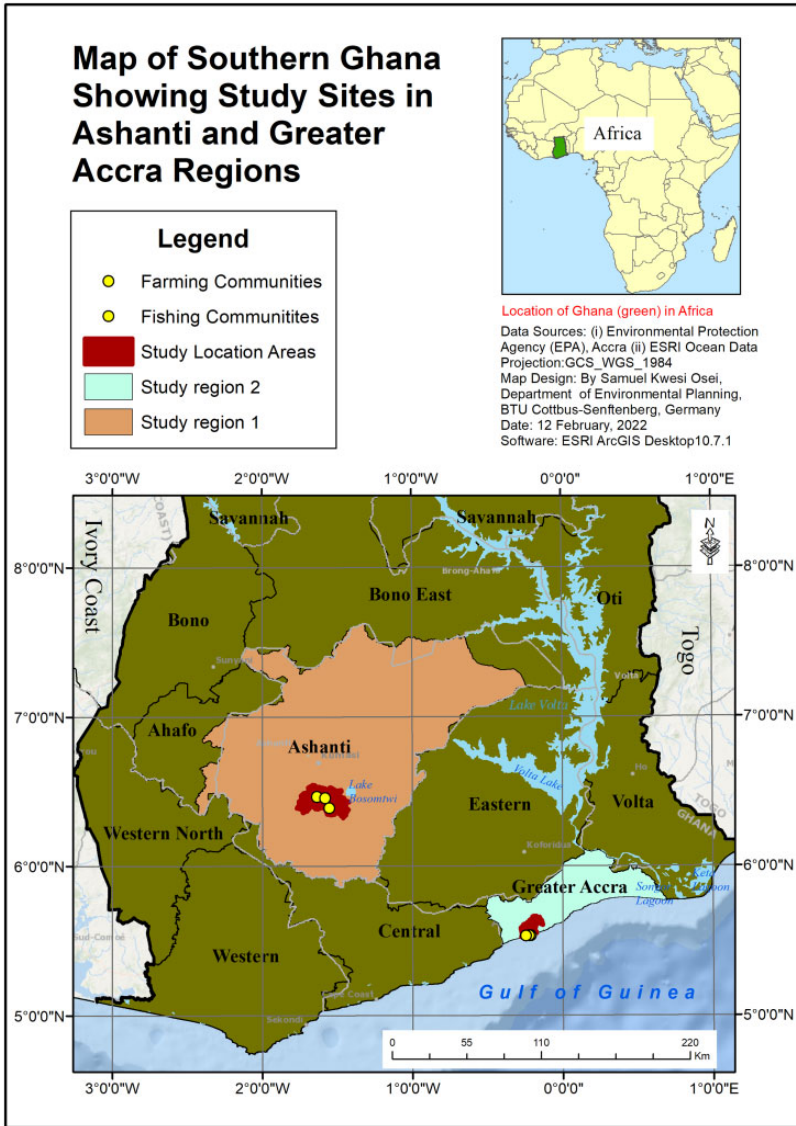


Figure 1: Map of Southern Ghana showing study sites in Ashanti and Greater Accra regions.

applied. During the indexing phase, aspects of the data that were consistent with a theme were recognised. This process was utilised with the complete set of textual data that had been collected. A numerical process was used to index the references and they were annotated in the margin alongside the text. The precise data-set was indexed in the earlier, fourth phase called charting and charts of the themes were arranged. Whilst the data-sets were

detached from their original setting, the data could be recognised as coming from the precise transcript from which they were detached, and transcripts were saved in the same order. During the mapping in the final phase, the main attributes as put in the charts were analysed and interpreted using NVIVO. The analysis provided a schematic diagram of the event which provided direction in describing the data-set.

Trustworthiness

My competence and skills in interviewing participants form the basis for safeguarding trustworthiness of the gathered and analysed data (Eisner, 2017). I used a tape recorder to record all interviews, thereby enhancing trustworthiness. Additionally, I audited the research, illuminating every phase of the research process, complementing and justifying what was undertaken. I dealt with issues of bias, and my own sentiments were bracketed out during the data gathering process. At the end of the data analysis, I asked participants to clarify aspects of the research that seemed ambiguous, to ensure the trustworthiness of my interpretations. I used different sources to triangulate the data (Carter *et al.*, 2014).

Research limitations

Translating participants' views from local languages into English in a manner that sufficiently reflects their meaning was one of the difficulties of this research. Translation unavoidably includes interpretation by the translator of what an informant has said. Therefore, amplification and choice of words could have functioned as a persuasive element. Depending on self-reporting by participants is another limitation. This implies that there is a danger that some of the participants' answers did not express their genuine viewpoints since they sought to impress me or other participants, thus resulting in a 'social desirability bias'. Another difficulty was biased samples and biased returns considering the application of purposive sampling. I tried to reduce the problem of self-reporting by utilising a consent form and explaining it at the commencement of the research. For instance, the application of propositions in the consent form, was one avenue to reduce emotional language and to convince the reader of the researcher's disconnection from the analysis. Additionally, I standardised the interview schedule, the theory, methods, findings and conclusion structure that is intended to minimise rhetorical excess. I used scientific terms that seemingly minimised the ambiguous implications of words in the interest of accuracy.

Results

Rural area

During the participant observation many children five to seventeen years old were observed engaging in farm activities such as gathering rubbish, cooking, preparing the land, transporting and planting of seedlings, weeding, harvesting and fermenting cocoa seeds as these activities contribute to the inter-generational transfer of technical and social skills and children's food security. A parent explained:

Work socialisation is a cultural value that all parents expect their children to go through and help in their development. Hence, social workers need to take our values into consideration when determining whether a child is engaged in child labour or not.

A focus group participant suggested that there are societal expectations that children should be assigned some work that would provide them with work ethics, mould their character and teach them how to cooperate with others. Another participant, a Director of Anonymous Commission said:

In some situations, children go to the farm during the weekends and in other cases, children go to work in the farm before or after school.

Stakeholders explained that children's participation in work is considered as crucial within the philosophy of encouraging family support and community-based resolutions. This humanist approach supports the UNCRC and its emphasis on children's rights, strengthening child-friendly communities and identifying creative means of rallying a wide range of players in supporting children's welfare. A parent explained:

My daughter supports me on the farm whenever her school is on break. Many reports of child abuse are not accurate because of our way of living.

Participants of the focus group explained that girls undertake housework and take care of younger siblings, and this usually improves family welfare. Furthermore, improved self-confidence, as well as work skills, are attributes often spotted in young people engaged in some form of work. I observed that most of these activities were age-appropriate tasks that were of low risk and did not interfere with children's schooling and leisure time. I also observed that whilst girls were typically engaged in cooking for the family on the farm, fermenting cocoa seeds, drying pods and planting seedlings, boys were engaged in preparation of the land, weeding and transporting seedlings. This was reinforced by a Principal Labour Officer who said:

Children learn a lot of skills from their parents by working with them on the farms. Again, girls learn a lot from their mothers undertaking domestic task such as washing clothes, cooking, and cleaning.

Some social workers suggested that they are culturally responsive during their assessment because they are culturally competent. To supplement the service delivery system of agencies, some stakeholders suggested that agencies need to create a mission and vision statement that supports different cultural practices whilst training social workers and agency managers to be culturally competent. Stakeholders indicated that culturally responsive services need to be implemented and assessed to demonstrate the cultural competence of the agency and professionals. The Director of Anonymous Commission expressed it as follows:

I consider work socialisation in my assessment as I consider the characteristics of culture, socio-political, demographic, and contextual dimensions, settings and perspectives of the local people to make my decisions.

In the focus groups, most participants explained culture as customs, behaviour, beliefs and shared values common to the local families. Participants view assessment to be culturally responsive if it completely considers the value of work that is being assessed and the needs and cultural boundaries of work socialisation. A Director of Anonymous Department echoed:

I consider local values in my assessment of work. I blend cultural responsiveness and best interests of the child in my assessments. I attempt to bring anti-discrimination or anti-oppression and cultural responsiveness approaches into the assessment process.

Stakeholders suggested that children are expected to be raised to acquire basic skills necessary to become productive adults. Even some parents with formal western education still want to rear their children according to their cultural norms. A Registrar of Anonymous Commission said:

I believe your explanation of treating children right is based on the western standards. Any social worker who wants to work with us needs to understand cultural values here before making any ridiculous assessment.

Social workers in anonymous government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) indicated that interventions based on a formalised child welfare system would fail as parents are still entrenched in their cultural values. They suggested a well-structured hybrid system made up of a formalised child welfare structure and family support and community-based resolutions. A social worker in Anonymous Office explained:

Social workers should be abreast with cultural values that impact on childrearing in these communities.

Stakeholders and focus group participants are of the view that cultural responsiveness should be recognised in all government agencies and NGOs charged with the responsibility of carrying out child protection assessment. Further, the law courts need to be culturally responsive when it comes to determining matters of child labour, child abuse and child custody.

Urban area

In the urban area, many children aged between five and seventeen years old were observed engaging in fishing activities such as mending fish nets, freeing snagged nets, loading and unloading fish, draining canoes, crewing on canoes, handling and repairing nets, herding fish into nets, cooking, working as porters, guarding fishing canoes in docks, sorting fish, cleaning and salting fish, smoking/drying fish, painting, fish marketing, harvesting shellfish, lifting nets of fish using hand cranes, peeling shrimp, drying, boiling and shelling various types of seafood, boiling and drying fish. Division of labour is usually structured on gender lines for children: girls tend to engage in post-harvest tasks such as sorting out fishes, smoking of fishes, cooking, fish marketing and selling of fishes, whilst boys are usually engaged in harvesting shellfish, draining canoes, painting, handling and repairing nets and herding fish into nets.

Stakeholders suggested the establishment of a mission and vision statement that recognises different cultural practices. Furthermore, a stakeholder suggested that culturally responsive services need to be performed and evaluated to prove the cultural competence of the agency. Stakeholders suggested the need for professionals in Anonymous Department, Commission and Office to participate in professional development workshops developed to support them with skills needed to design and undertake culturally responsive assessment. The Director of Anonymous Department explained:

Through training, I have expanded my knowledge of culture and contextual factors which has resulted in reconsidering my role in re-defining solutions to deal with my cultural realities. I now consider the cultural values of the local community in determining cases of child labour that are brought before me.

Stakeholders explained that an important belief is that girls are not suited to performing the physical work associated with going to sea. Furthermore, girls undertake fish processing or household chores such as sweeping, cooking, washing dishes and making beds. A parent said:

We value work socialisation so when a social welfare department receives reports of child labour, they should investigate it thoroughly

since such a reported case could be one of our normal work socialisations.

Other participants in the focus group discussion articulated similar views highlighting the need for children to learn fishing skills and work ethics to better equip them for their future life. A focus group participant said:

I think boys must be trained to be tough in life. Fishing in this community is largely not mechanised which makes the work difficult, so it can serve as a platform to make them tough and provide additional hands to families.

Some focus group participants explained that children's rights are a western project. Other participants explained that they blend the western childrearing style with their cultural values to produce a unique hybrid system. A social worker who is the Director of Anonymous Commission said:

I believe most staff of this commission would consider cultural responsiveness in their assessment of work.

Many participants explained that children learn their adult roles by observing their parents at work and in the home. Parents provide detailed instructions on what is regarded as appropriate behaviour through verbal and material rewards. Household training also offers children formal and informal education. Another parent argued:

I'm bringing up my children to be responsible citizens. Social workers should not think I am abusing my children when they work for me.

Some parents also suggested that cultural values are well suited to make their children contributory citizens. A Coordinator of Anonymous Institute explained:

Although we want to socialise our children to become responsible adults, we should also give them formal education.

Some stakeholders suggested a new law that would help social workers to interpret light work in the cultural context and not as child labour. A parent explained:

I think the Anonymous Department needs to be resourced to organise courses for social workers on the need to integrate cultural responsiveness in child protection assessments.

Additionally, stakeholders suggested the need for public education to enhance parents' knowledge about the engagement of children in work *vis-à-vis* children's rights. Another stakeholder explained the need for the central government to invest more resources into educating parents on child labour and children's rights.

Discussion

Gendered nature of work

Participants' comments on the gendered nature of work are an illustration of the broader theme of prioritising cultural values in social work practice. Farming and fishing in the rural and urban areas foster gender differences among working children in different ways, one of the most pervasive being 'internal stratification'. Thus, boys and girls engaged in farming and fishing undertake different roles and tasks as boys and girls are either totally or almost separated by sex. The fact that boys and girls seldomly undertake the same tasks implies that whilst specific tasks may be identified as feminine, other activities are identified as masculine, thus reinforcing gender differences. There are gender differences in the use of agricultural inputs, and institutional and cultural constraints affecting intra-family assignments of farm and fishing management and marketing duties. The gender gap disappears or diminishes significantly once these elements are controlled.

Mission and vision statement

In delivering culturally responsive services, agencies are to establish and apply a mission and vision statement that embraces different cultures. Agencies need to train staff who would immerse themselves in the cultural practices and communication ([Calzada and Suarez-Balcazar, 2014](#)) and evaluate culturally responsive service delivery to support the organisational setting. From the organisational standpoint, cultural competence might include policies and practices that enhance outreach and information dissemination in a way that is transparent and all-inclusive ([Calzada and Suarez-Balcazar, 2014](#)). Additionally, I contend that social workers should reflect on cultural values that are fundamental to establishing relationship with parents, since this will enhance healthy relationships. A well-organised hybrid child protection system can be developed considering the Ghanaian cultural values. 'Culture influences expresses expectations of the various roles that should be played by the state, the family and by the community in relation to the child' ([Hetherington, 2002](#), p. 14). Cultural variations in philosophical underpinnings have seriously impacted on the evolution of child protection as it is filled with emotions, values and belief systems and expectations about the way society should react. The extent to which cultural reflexivity impacts on professional judgement and operation and activities within the practice context is critical.

Personal and professional reflexivity

There is the need for vigilance on the influence of theoretical cultures and the ‘censorship exercised by disciplinary and institutional attachments’ (Wacquant, 1998, p. 226), thus, gains relevance, coupled with cultural reflexivity in the contexts of professional and personal self. Inability to understand the strength of personal and professional reflexivity may generate the possibility for theory and practice to be established on reflexive reactions that have little to do with the service user and more to do with the social workers following their agency’s policies. Discussion on professional behaviours and the way they influence the service provision has been macro-oriented, echoing the importance of aetiological understandings and their influence on the type and level of services offered. In the micro sense, however, theoretical cultures together with individual cultural thoughts have attracted little consideration.

Globally, service provision systems react to a diverse set of cultural circumstances that express societal expectations on the way the state and society need to intervene in children’s and families’ lives. Furthermore, Hetherington (2016) puts forward three critical elements that impact on the advancement and operation of child welfare systems: culture, cultures and professional ideology. Structural systems impact on how interventions happen and reinforce the philosophy that supports them. For instance, the legal regime that protects family participation in decision-making about child welfare certainly moulds how we conceive family participation and the rights of the family to take part in issues that concern them. Additionally, professional philosophies direct practice and impact on social workers in their choices. Hetherington (2002) observes that although administrative structures, resources and the legal regime offer the framework for child protection practice, real choices are usually grounded on professional knowledge and theory.

Culturally responsive service

Stakeholders in Ghana are invariably working to establish systems that safeguard disadvantaged children and support their families and communities. Some stakeholders express the need to bring service development into line with national resources, service structures and cultural value systems. In identifying Ghanaians needs in the context of child protection, participants suggested that the government should attempt to design an approach that is more equitable and culturally responsive. This approach should be able to respond to the needs and interests of disadvantaged children (Libesman, 2013). The Ghanaian child protection system is a community-oriented approach that is usually integrated in the

formal welfare system, thus expressing the formal orientation of the community. Broadly, this system includes the prescribed ways through which legal protections could be offered to children; however, there is a preference for informal settlements within the community (Connolly and Katz, 2019). Sometimes, decision-making processes grounded on the traditional community are positioned alongside formal child protection systems. Scholars classify child welfare responses into two welfare philosophies: family support and community-based resolutions and child protection (Gilbert, 1997; Hetherington, 2002). Jurisdictions that operate the child protection system (e.g. Australia, Canada, England and the USA) have been identified to lean towards the legalistic method of operation with a deep focus on investigative procedures and using resources at the ‘front end’ of the child protection process (Connolly *et al.*, 2006). On the other hand, jurisdictions in continental western Europe (e.g. Belgium, France, Germany and Sweden) focus on family support and community-based resolutions in their orientation. These jurisdictions are viewed to focus on prevention within a larger system of universal welfare.

The emphasis on integrating cultural values into the Ghanaian child protection system places it firmly within the philosophy of family support and community-based resolutions. The strength of this approach originates from the unique and varied ways for maximising children’s welfare within the cultural contexts (Connolly and Katz, 2019). This method firmly supports the UNCRC which is the most extensively ratified international human rights instrument—providing every child the right to quality education. Article 29, paragraph 2 of the UNCRC specifies ‘the need for education to be child-centred, child-friendly and empowering and it highlights the need for educational processes to be based on the very principles it enunciates’.

Conclusion

Addressing the issue concerning the depth of understanding of social workers’ own cultural identity and attitude is central to culturally responsive practice in child protection. There is the need to incorporate this understanding with knowledge of the effect of discrimination, oppression and prejudice on self-concept. Furthermore, the way this impacts on stereotypes and cultural biases is significant source of self-knowledge. Such understanding is not just important for culturally responsive practice, but it is crucial for the social worker to have knowledge about the limitations of their ability. There is the need for this awareness development process to include interaction with different cultural groups over a long period to understand and to be sensitivity to the socio-cultural factors that drive the engagement of children in work.

This would help to design and implement the most suitable mechanisms for intervention and prevention of harm to children and, more generally, in applying the UNCRC and working out the parenting policies and practices that are in the best interests of the child. Thus, the engagement with cultural communities would also help in the design and governance arrangements associated with policies and programmes intended to shield children from exploitative and hazardous work. Additionally, interaction with different cultural groups would enable parents to support social workers to determine the kind of behaviours that is required from them. Furthermore, interaction with parents would help adopt policies that would combat forms of work undertaken by children that fall within the category of WFCL and at the same time adopt policies that are culturally sensitive to work that help the child develop useful skills. Social work professionals need to do a cultural assessment of all cases of engaging children in work that come before them to ascertain whether the work being performed is helping the child develop useful skills. Open attempts to establish relations with different cultural groups would promote the prospect of constructive effect on child protection system. Social workers engaged in child protection activities can establish relations with varied cultural groups so that these groups partner and safeguard the child protection relation. On the contrary, social workers involved in child protection can have antagonistic relations with cultural groups. There is the possibility for the social worker to reinforce discriminatory, oppressive and prejudicial reactions in view of their inadequate information about their service users' cultural group in these circumstances. Limited understanding or contact usually reinforces social workers' stereotypes about some cultural groups. Even though it is acknowledged that some cultural knowledge is critical, scholars contend that it needs to be expanded to encompass highlighting the knowledge of system context as well as knowing about existing systemic inequalities, histories of colonisation, racial politics, slavery and other forms of oppression. These insights are central to cultural competence.

There is the need to translate the areas of knowledge and attitude into a range of professional conducts. Social workers engaged in child protection work need to possess process skills, conceptualisation skills and personalisation skills as put forward by (Lum, 2010). These skills need to be designed within the framework of cultural knowledge. First, there is the need for social workers to have the capacity to engage with service users, establish relationship and accomplish service user/social worker healthy relationship utilising a variety of micro skills. Secondly, social workers need to possess conceptualisation skills which are basically analytical skills that allow social workers to analyse a case, reveal themes in service user languages and planning of effective assessment and intervention approaches. These skills are very crucial as social workers might have a lot of information—contradictory information about

sometimes the circumstances surrounding the safety and care of a child. Thirdly, social workers need to have personalisation skills which include being open and respectful of service user's difficulties devoid of assuming a defensive posture. These three elements of the social worker's cultural identity, attitude, knowledge and skills should be seen as intertwined and reliant on one another. The intertwined skills-focused develops over time needing a commitment and desire of the social worker to learn. The initial step toward attaining cultural competence is having knowledge and accepting the realism that being opened to continuous, lasting and persistent development is needed. There is no ideal completion time just as all other professional development programmes are. This premise forms the basis of having any effective working relationship with varied service user populations.

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