

Acceptance, obedience and resistance: Children's perceptions of street trading in Nigeria

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Abstract

Street trading is an under-researched form of child labour. This study explores experiences of children aged 10–15 in Nigeria, using interviews and focus groups. Children largely accepted the need to contribute economically to the family, as well as their own school expenses. Trading was demanding, and there were hidden costs, such as reduced school attendance, but an emphasis on obedience made challenge difficult. Children felt resistance, but knowledge of their rights did not support acting on these feelings. Accounts demonstrated the difficulties of living at the intersection of competing constructions of childhood.

KEYWORDS

child labour, children's rights, Nigeria, school, street trading

INTRODUCTION

Recent attempts in Nigeria to implement children's rights and extend education beyond primary level appear to be challenging. Drawing on interviews and focus groups with 17 child traders aged 10–15 in a market town in Nigeria, this article reflects on tensions emerging from children's participation in trading during school hours, despite the implementation of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC; United Nations, 1989), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACC; Organisation of African Unity (OAU), 1990) and subsequent children's rights legislation in Nigeria.

The article begins by exploring the context of child trading in Nigeria. It considers the difficulties of reconciling constructions of childhood inherent in the CRC and ACC with the needs and cultural

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values of most African family realities. These sometimes conflicting principles shape understandings of child trading. As an underexplored area, child trading can be seen as a non-hazardous, income-generating activity, which develops skills and values within children; however, it can also have hidden harms. This paper draws on and contributes to the growing body of research capturing children's perceptions of labour in sub-Saharan Africa. It presents data on children's experiences of trading, which are characterised by feelings of acceptance, obedience and resistance. Accounts illustrate constant negotiations as children attempt to accommodate expectations of their traditional roles within the family alongside the awareness of rights they receive in school. The article concludes by suggesting that child trading must be understood within the complexity of family and community life in Nigeria. Children's rights in terms of access to schooling are interwoven with expectations around their contribution to the family, reflecting blurred boundaries between labour and education.

Children's rights and the construction of childhood

The CRC set out a comprehensive and explicit package of rights designed to apply to all children (United Nations, 1989). Its three core principles are well-documented. Provision covers rights to health, education, social security, care and leisure; protection relates to rights to safety from discrimination, abuse and injustice; and participation sets out rights for children to contribute to matters that affect them (United Nations, 1989). However, although the widespread adoption of the CRC suggests global acceptance of these principles, they have also been seen to enshrine a particular construction of childhood (see e.g., James & Prout, 1997). The vision of the child as an individual, conceptually disaggregated from the collective family unit and requiring special protection while developing increasing agency, has been argued to be a western artefact. This fails to recognise the plurality of childhoods across and within different cultures (Baraldi & de Castro, 2020).

A number of African states subsequently adopted the ACC (Organisation of African Unity (OAU), 1990). This contextualised childhood, addressing the challenges of child labour, abuse and the need for protection within an African culture and setting. The ACC aimed to consider and resolve children's rights on a local basis while upholding cultures, traditions and histories unique to the region, countries and states within countries (Lloyd, 2002). Article 15 of the ACC specifically refers to child labour, prohibiting all forms of exploitation arising from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development. As with the other instruments, what is termed *hazardous* is open to interpretation.

One of the most contentious areas of international children's rights, which is encompassed within the principle of participation, is consent. The concept of consent is linked to values upheld by Nigerian families, such as obedience, and has implications for trading, school and ultimately for children's rights to education. Abebe and Bessell (2011) acknowledge that a critical understanding of the conditions in which children work is crucial to the debate on child labour. They argue that the discourse on a work-free childhood in African communities suggests that paid work is always considered exploitative; however, within a particular sociocultural context, such as the Nigerian one, not all children who work are considered to be exploited. There are locally acceptable forms of labour, such as parents sending their children to trade, although these may be considered exploitative outside the confines of the family (Abebe & Bessell, 2011) and could also be so within the household. Child trading/hawking has been less studied within research on child labour, although it is reflected in the Nigerian Labour Act (2003) as 'family business'. The interpretation of 'family business' creates tensions when children's involvement in work/trading activities is seen as essential to support the family financially. Families encourage children to work as it promotes obedience and respect for adults alongside generating much

needed income. Encouraging children to become involved in economic activities means they can contribute positively to the household (Boyden & Crivello, 2012). Thus, a good understanding of issues relating to culture, traditions and/or practices is important to understand how values such as respect, obedience and consent contribute to the persistence of child labour despite rights to education.

Historically, children have not been able to consent or withhold their consent to issues concerning them (Montgomery, 2009; O'Reilly et al., 2013). In some African communities, this idea is still dominant; the right to consent distinguishes childhood from adulthood, although attaining adulthood does not in itself guarantee the capability to exercise consent. Thus, although the ACC refers to the evolving capacity of the child to participate in decisions, as well as upholding the principle that those who are responsible for the child should act in their best interests, there is a competing discourse of childhood, which emphasises compliance. In addition, the ACC supports the idea that children 'have responsibilities towards their families and societies' (Article 31). Therefore, the notion of consent by a child in Africa seems to run counter to their duty 'to respect their parents, superiors and elders' (Article 31) at all times. The ACC clearly upholds the best interests of the child, along with rights to education and to be protected from hazardous labour, but this can potentially be overridden by duty to parents or to support cultural values. This conception of rights reflects the African communitarian perspective, which has traditionally prioritised the communal world over the individual (Masaka, 2018).

Since the adoption of ACC, more countries in Africa have legislated to protect children (Mulinge, 2010). However, many children have continued to experience labour and/or exploitation with little or no opportunity for education (Bass, 2004; Basu, 1999). Within Nigeria, the Child Rights Act (CRA) was passed in 2003, encompassing children's rights and focusing on protection. Although the CRA attempts to address the shortcomings of previous legislation, there are many obstacles in the implementation process. Each state having its own government and judiciary has led to a wide range of laws among different states, with little positive effect on children's rights (Agbo, 2017; Ogunniran, 2010). The CRC therefore has not succeeded in gaining acceptance of a universal model of childhood, as reflected in the perceived need for the more culturally specific ACC. These conflicts are further exacerbated by regional as well as national legislation and the multiplicity of cultures within Nigeria.

Child labour, child trading and children's rights

The concept of child labour is fundamentally at odds with the contemporary western middle-class ideal of the child as playful scholar. There are many problems in obtaining reliable data about working children, not least because of the definitional problems, which are discussed shortly, yet child labour in some form is undoubtedly the everyday reality for millions of children. In 2015, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimated that ~168 million children, or 11% of the global population of children, are involved in child labour (International Labour Organisation (ILO), 2015). In absolute terms, almost half of child labour is found in Africa (International Labour Organisation (ILO), 2019). Several key factors are cited within the literature to explain the intractable nature of child labour. Poverty is the dominant element, but others such as cultural and religious beliefs, lack of education, legal inconsistencies and enforcement failures have also been highlighted (Hilson, 2012; Nafees et al., 2012; Okafor, 2010).

Child labour is complex, subject to various definitions and reflecting competing positions on the activities seen as appropriate for children. Different cultures hold expectations and goals for their children that can make child labour complicated to define (Bourdillon et al., 2010; Pantea, 2009). At one extreme, any form of child labour is considered harmful, principally because it deprives children of what has come to be seen as childhood: a period of freedom from responsibility and employment

(James & Prout, 1997). Within this position, children are ideally placed within education, specifically in the form of schooling.

Other positions seek to recognise that children may need to engage in some form of labour, more commonly because it is an economic necessity but also because trading is seen to be teaching them certain skills valued in their communities (Schildkrout, 2002). Schildkrout (2002), in her ethnographic work in Northern Nigeria, discusses trade as an indigenous learning approach that socialises and teaches children key skills such as calculation and customer service. From this perspective, children are entitled to derive benefits from labour, and the focus here becomes on ensuring that children are not damaged in the process. ILO Convention 182 (International Labour Organisation (ILO), 1999) characterised the worst forms of child labour as ones that are exploitative and cause physical, psychological or developmental harm. This can lead to a stance that tries to draw a distinction between child labour (problematic or exploitative work) and child work (lighter work that is not inherently harmful). However, as Bourdillon (2006) cautions, setting up simplistic distinctions between harmful and non-harmful types of work is unhelpful as the boundary between the two is not always explicit. A key issue is the impact on school attendance, with consequent lack of educational attainment. The ILO recognises that a legal approach on its own is not enough in addressing child labour (Deaton, 2018). However, legislation is important because it helps to establish norms and standards and is often the necessary first step to dealing with social issues.

It is within this context that the current study's focus can be understood. Street trading in Nigeria is a very common form of child labour. While acknowledging the difficulties in obtaining precise figures, one study among adolescents in Oyo State (Adegbenro et al., 2017) found that 31.5% of respondents had worked at some point, and 24.2% were currently engaged in labour. Of the children who worked, 85% did so for their parents, and most (71.3%) did not receive any payment. Street trading was the second commonest form of employment, with 76.3% having traded at some point. Children reported being exposed to dangers, feeling tired and poor school attendance. They were more likely to be in employment if they were from large families and if their mothers had a lower level of education (Adegbenro et al., 2017). A different study (Togunde & Carter, 2006) used data gathered through interviews with 1535 children (aged 8–14) and their parents in urban Nigeria to highlight the dangers reported by children who work in the urban economy. Slightly over half the child labourers were female; they began as early as age 7 and worked for an average of 4 h a day in order to contribute financially to their families. The children came mostly from large, low-income households. A significant percentage of working children were involved in car accidents and faced kidnapping, rape and sexual molestation. Many participated in robbery and antisocial activities. Others suffered from physical exhaustion and pains due to frequent long walks. These health problems had detrimental effects on children's school attendance, punctuality, attainment and leisure time (Togunde & Carter, 2006). Ekpenyong and Sibiri's (2011) study of street trading and child labour in Yenagoa, Nigeria, highlighted chronic urban poverty. For many hours each day, children of poor parents were engaged in economic activities including hawking, plaiting of hair and being apprenticed to various trades, with no opportunity to attend school. This is consistent with Okafor's (2010) argument that working instead of schooling compromises well-being.

The discourse about child labour has achieved greater recognition in recent decades based on socioeconomic and structural perspectives (Abebe & Bessell, 2011; Cisneros & Neumann, 2009). Abebe and Bessell (2011) explain that the social studies of childhood changed the natural 'common sense' of children into a sociocultural concept that suggests children's labour is inseparably linked to the context in which it takes place. Child labour therefore exemplifies key contestations of childhood, which contributes to the implementation failure of children's rights instruments. Although the CRC principally sets up an expectation of schooling over labour, this division is more complex within the ACC where

the best interests of the child can be subordinate to the wider interests of adults and collectives, both familial and social. In addition, the need for material resources to support children's welfare can be at odds with the discourse of rights. Attempts have been made to reconcile these tensions by focusing efforts on the most damaging forms of child labour, but these in turn can fail due to the hidden disadvantages of other forms. This paper aims to illuminate what children who trade say about how they negotiate these competing expectations and visions of their social role.

Research design

This qualitative study explores children's constructions and experiences of trading. It is part of a wider case study of Oba Market in Benin City, Nigeria, which considers the perspectives of children, parents and social workers in relation to child trading. Within this paper, the focus is on the children's testimony. A social constructivist approach is adopted in order to unpack the meanings that children attributed to their position and rights within their families, along with how they felt about and understood their trading practice.

A social constructivist approach focuses on the central role of culture and context in shaping social understandings and knowledge (Kukla, 2000). Such knowledge is evident in this article through the interpretations and meanings children attribute to respect, obedience and responsibility. Thus, the interpretation of testimony is a process of uncovering shared meaning. As researchers, this interpretation was a value-bound process. One of us (A.O.) grew up in Nigeria, having direct experience of trading as a child and subsequently training as a social worker in adulthood. The other two of us are European but from diverse personal, professional and academic backgrounds. Therefore, we collectively brought a range of values and positionalities to our understandings of children's accounts and stressed how they could be linked to wider perspectives on childhood in diverse cultural contexts. The impact on data analysis is considered briefly later.

Setting

The study was conducted in Oba Market, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria. Benin is the capital of Edo State and the headquarters of one of the local government areas (Oredo Local Government). Oba Market was selected due to its heterogeneous nature and strategic position. The market is situated in the city centre, easily accessible to all in the community (Okaka et al., 2013). Due to its size, more children are involved in trading in Oba Market than in any other market in Benin. The market is also close to a new central hospital, the largest in Edo State. It is estimated that more than 5000 people, mostly women and children, trade daily within the market (Eseigbe and Ojeifo, 2012; Okaka et al., 2013). Unlike other markets, it operates every day of the week. Although adults sell their wares from a pitch within the market, children move around constantly, carrying their wares on their heads and approaching potential buyers. Although it is illegal for children to trade within school hours, numerous children do so each day.

Sample

The inclusion criteria for the participating children were that they were 10–15 years old and had current experience of trading within Oba Market, and their parents/guardians were contactable and could

approve their participation. Recruitment took place through two gatekeepers who were familiar with the market: one of whom was a local community leader and another who was a regular trader. The gatekeepers recruited children who were trading in the market and oversaw the consent process, explaining the purpose of the research, asking them if they would like to participate and gathering written assent from the children and consent from their parents/guardians. The gatekeepers were chosen because they were sympathetic to the research but more importantly because they were well known and trusted within the market. It was essential that children did not feel coerced into participating or worry that there would be negative consequences for them following any information they might reveal. In total, 17 children were recruited, 10 girls and seven boys, aged 10–15.

METHODS

Data collection took place via focus groups (two groups containing six children in each) and individual semi-structured interviews (five children). The combination of methods was designed to enable different accounts to emerge and was developed during an initial pilot phase. The focus groups gave children the chance to share ideas with their peers. This is often recommended as a corrective to the power imbalance of adult–child data collection approaches, as children may feel more secure in a group (Hennessy & Heary, 2005). It was also necessary to be mindful that children who have been exposed to challenging issues and social conditions may not always be able to speak out strongly (Pillay, 2014). Children who were more cautious were encouraged by their peers. However, some were confident enough to be interviewed individually, and this meant that their testimonies were given without any peer influence. In both methods, a loosely structured interview guide was employed; children were given the opportunity to discuss what mattered to them, with prompts where necessary to gain deeper insight. Interviews and focus groups took place in a safe setting provided by the gatekeeper within the market. Nigerian Pidgin English was used throughout. Regarded as a separate language to standard English (Akande, 2010), it is universally understood by all sectors of Nigerian society. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Data analysis

Data were analysed thematically, using an inductive process following Braun and Clark's (2006) six-step approach entailing familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes and writing up results. As a research team, we adopted different stances in relation to the data. A.O. was the primary analyst, but coding was constantly reviewed in the light of discussions among the whole team. A.O. had an intimate understanding of the data due to shared experiences, and she translated transcripts into standard English. In carrying out the fieldwork and analysing data, she adopted the classic etic role, yet she also occupied an emic role in examining the meaning her participants gave to their experiences, which was informed by her own personal history as a child trader. Hoare et al. (2013) note that the dual etic/emic role can often be a struggle for researchers. A.O. was both insider and outsider to the research process, in contrast to S.B. and A.S. as outsiders. However, these distinctions were valuable. The different perspectives that we brought to bear meant that assumptions and interpretations could be made explicit, mutually assessed and challenged. Shared understandings could not be taken for granted, and coding and theme generation were constantly revised in the light of this process of discussion and re-examination, making the analytic process inherently reflexive.

Ethical issues and approval

Children's assent was gained, along with parental consent. Participants were not necessarily familiar with the concept and purpose of a research interview. At the start of each interview and focus group, A.O. explained the research again to confirm assent, check understanding and remind everyone of the right to withdraw or to refuse to answer any question. Schenk and Williamson (2005) argue that it is vital for researchers to be aware of children's cultural norms in relation to age and gender. The research covered sensitive issues, so children were asked to keep each other's confidence by not sharing what they discussed outside of the group, apart from in the most general terms. However, it was important not to give false assurances, and they were also cautioned not to share anything too personal, as complete confidentiality could not be guaranteed. Care was taken to be aware of any distress or anxiety among the children, but in practice, none was evident. Ethical approval was obtained through the Faculty Research Ethics Panel at Anglia Ruskin University and through the University of Benin's Ethics Committee.

RESULTS

The children expressed complex feelings about their situation as traders. Three key themes can be identified within their experiences. Overall, children described having and accepting a duty to their parents because they are part of a collective unit. However, children experience different motives and responses in the way they engage with these expectations, which are expressed in two further themes of obedience and discontent/resistance. In the quotes below, children are identified by whether they took part in interviews (I) or focus groups (FG1 and FG2), participant number, age and gender.

Acceptance of duty

Every account of child trading emphasised material deprivation. Parental decisions were seen as stemming from necessity rather than choice. As one child commented about his mother,

It is not that she cannot do it herself, it's just that she cannot do it alone, she needs ... her children to be able to give her all the support that she needs. (I5, 12, M)

From the western perspective, underpinning the CRC in which the welfare of the child is paramount, the statement is a striking reversal of expectation. His comment reads almost as if he and his siblings are young carers. These sentiments are echoed by another child, who feels questioning trading is unthinkable.

[My mother] does not have enough money to care for all of us and if only her is doing it, it will be impossible for us to be able to get money to feed, not to talk of buying other things that we need as children. (FG2, 2, 13, F)

These feelings of duty extend to other family members.

Some of us children, it is not only our parents that send us to trade. Sometimes our uncles and aunties also send us. There is nothing we can do about it, that is a family thing. (FG2, 3, 13, M)

Children's accounts firmly position them as members of a hierarchical, collective unit in which they must play their part. Adults are dominant, and children must be contributors as well as recipients. Underpinning this, however, is a clear understanding of the economic realities, which shape the family context. The children accept both their social duty to contribute and the material need to do so.

Obedience

Another clear theme in children's accounts is the consistent message of obedience, although this is nuanced. Children are expected to be obedient to their parents regardless of circumstances, and this strongly reinforces the concept of familial duty, which is a key feature of the cultural context.

It is not a matter of whether I like trading or not, it is something you have to do as a child since your parents asked you to help them. All of us here are all brought up to obey our parents, you have no choice about that. (FG2, 2, 13, F)

Families and adult–child relationships in general are unambiguously unequal. There is no scope for children to exercise choice or participate in decisions.

It is not allowed and expected that you should talk back to or question your senior ones, especially your parents, about anything they send you to do, including trading. Any child that does that is regarded as a stubborn and disrespectful child. We know that our parents cannot be wrong. (FG2, 3, 13, M)

Even if children do not always accept their parents' judgement, they need to comply.

Whether we want to or not, we have to accept that we don't have any choice when our parents are deciding anything concerning us, whether it is for our own good or not, we have nothing to say or do except what they ask us to do or say. (I, 3, 13, M)

Obedience is enforced through different strategies, which can be punitive:

Yes, she said that she will not give me food one day for not going to hawk and she kept to her promise and I did not eat any food throughout that day. I had to be drinking water and I became sick after that. I didn't expect that she could do that. (I, 2, 13, M)

The participants illustrate a collective culture where children are expected to make personal sacrifices to adhere to familial norms, and their individual agency, the capacity to act on their own behalf, is limited. Even when children define themselves as independent, it is often in terms of taking the initiative to anticipate their parents' wishes. For example, several children discussed that their parents tell them to use the proceeds from trading to buy food in the market where they work. Some are now able to decide to buy food independently. This opportunity to exercise a degree of agency, in the form of choice and control over their contribution, brings pride and satisfaction:

I think by helping my mother to sell, I am able to know what to do most times even when my mother forgets to tell me what to do. Like buying what we are going to cook whenever I finish selling ... when I do that without being told, my mother is so happy that she will embrace me. (I, 5, 12, M)

Children thus demonstrate agency in how they meet parental expectations, but this operates within tight boundaries.

Obedience is the dominant motive for carrying out their parents' wishes, but it is not always blind. It can also be tempered with compassion, again suggesting an element of agency and a more subtle motivation. Children reported knowing the struggles their parents go through and expressed feelings of tenderness, for example,

I think that I have to help her because she needs my help, especially with the condition she is right now. She is not well, so I have to do it. (I, 1, 12, F)

In a similar situation, another explained how she felt when giving her mother the day's takings:

Whenever I am able to sell very well, sometimes everything, you will see the relief in my mother's face, I feel satisfied, that I have contributed to her happiness. (I, 4, 13, F)

This compassion is also reflected in one participant's account of the story told to him by his mother about her own childhood, which influenced his support for her.

My mother talks often about how she suffered when she was young, how difficult it was for her parents to be able to take care of them because she had a lot of siblings, her father was always sick, and her mother had to often be with him to take care of him before he finally passed away... Hearing such story makes me feel so sorry for her and become more determined to help her. (I, 5, 12, M)

Compassion promotes a sense of responsibility and awareness of tradition, rather than unthinking compliance.

Resistance and discontent

The children's accounts emphasise their lack of choice. Trading is accepted with varying degrees of willingness, although most make it clear that it is at best unwelcome and often extremely onerous. However, occasionally, resistance is glimpsed. Children do not always accept decisions uncritically, and to some extent, the discourse of rights feeds this discontent.

Not all children were aware of their rights, but some discuss that they had been taught about them in school.

I am aware because my teacher reminds us of it every time, especially when we are expecting inspectors from the ministry. (I, 2, 13, M)

Whenever we are in the assembly at school, they talk about it. (I, 5, 12, M)

However, knowing about their rights did not mean they could exercise them in the domestic setting. When asked if they had discussed the rights they had learned about at school with their parents, one child commented:

If I tell her she will still force me to go ahead and trade anyway. I tried it once, the very day, they taught us about our rights in our social studies class and I told my mother that as a child, I am not supposed to be trading, so I refused to go that day, my mother beat me so much, at the end I still had to go. (I, 2, 13, M)

Most thought their parents were not even aware of the concept of children's rights:

Most of us, our parents don't know anything about our rights as children. They expect us to just do as we are told as for them we don't have any right, they are the ones to decide for us. (FG2, 6, 15, F)

This calls into question the value of rights education. Even raising the concept of rights seems provocative. Further tension arises as trading is necessary to support education, which has significant costs attached.

How do you expect me to tell her that I cannot sell today, she will just kill me, especially when she has already explained to us that our daddy said he has no money to give us to buy our complete books. So, I have to do it whether I like it or not. (I, 4, 13, F)

Although education is officially free within Nigeria, there are many associated expenses that place a considerable burden on low-income families:

It is only school fees that we don't pay for, we pay for every other thing that we need in school like test and exam fees. We also buy all our books, pencils, colour paints, biros and all other things that may be needed when we are in school. So, we have to do it, whether we are forced or not. (I, 2, 13, M)

Even when you come to calculate it sometimes, you will see that all these other things we pay for in school is more than the school fees we are not paying, that is why we have to do it. (FG1, 4, 14, F)

Children are very aware that trading directly subsidises their schooling. The costs of education are guiltily perceived as another burden. One child notes:

At least with this help we always give to our mother, we are able to buy some of the things that we need in school and also buy some of the wares we need for school without stressing her. (FG2, 3, 13, M)

The above comment suggests that the child is able to take control of buying necessary school supplies; thus, even if trading is unwelcome, it conveys some benefit.

Education is seen as a privilege to be afforded rather than a right. Yet while trading facilitates the costs of schooling, it can negatively affect attendance, which children accept with resignation.

I will go tomorrow, and I will ask my friends what the teacher taught today. (I, 1, 12, F)

As long as I am not in school today, I don't think of what is happening, I have missed school today already, there is nothing I can do about it, if I am able to go tomorrow, then I will just copy note and get on with other things for that day. (I, 3, 14, F)

Children are not permitted to trade within school hours, but this is frequently flouted. Even when children manage to combine trading and schooling, it is exhausting.

Once I finish from school and I get home, I immediately have to go to the market, because things that I am going to sell are already prepared and waiting for me. It's just for me to just change, eat and go. (I, 4, 13, F)

Trading therefore seems to have a negative impact on education yet is simultaneously necessary to achieve it.

One or two children mention that they think trading can make them responsible:

I think it has kind of made me strong and hardworking. (I, 1, 12, F)

However, most convey a sense that they resent it. They trade because they are made to rather than because they accept it as part of their lives.

If they ask me to choose, I will not sell. It is because I have no choice, that is why I have to sell to help my mother. (FG2, 4, 14, F)

Knowledge of the rights that they have in principle therefore does not spark immediate rebellion in children, either in terms of actions or consciousness. Nevertheless, combined with the harsh pragmatic realities of trading, it contributes to a sense of unfairness. Children's testimonies reveal that they are at the epicentre of competing discourses around their role within the family and society. The tensions in their accounts reflect the difficulties of inhabiting this uneasy space.

DISCUSSION

There are limitations to this small-scale study. Notably, we only recruited children who had parents or guardians who were willing for them to take part. Children who did not have someone available to provide consent, or whose parents were unwilling for them to discuss their experiences, may have provided different accounts. Nevertheless, the study provides important insights for our understanding of trading as a type of child labour.

This paper has addressed key themes of acceptance, obedience but also resistance and resilience as experienced by children in the context of a Nigerian market town.

The focus on the worst forms of child labour should not obscure consideration of the impact of other modes, such as trading. Although on the surface trading is less directly exploitative, it can have negative consequences. On the one hand, it can operate alongside schooling, deliver immediate financial benefits and allow children to develop skills and operate with some agency. Even studies of more hazardous labour, such as mining (André & Godin, 2013; Okyere, 2013), have found that there are opportunities for children to show initiative, gain respect and contribute to school costs within

the context of intergenerational structures. Yet on the other hand, trading is exhausting, frequently displaces schooling and leaves children resentful and conflicted. Education is prized, but it is also the source of messages concerning rights, which potentially undermine parental definitions of the ideal child, who contributes and obeys. To be a 'successful' child in this context, good school attendance must coexist with availability for trading, and school participation requires absenteeism to be affordable. This is a difficult path for children to navigate.

For the most part, values of obedience and respect, alongside material need, override any construct of rights. Trading inevitably can result in poor educational outcomes, which is reflected in numerous studies of working children across the world. For example, Mickelson's (2000) study of the Americas found that children working in the street often fall behind in their studies and eventually drop out of school due to the incompatibility between their labour and school hours and the conflicting demands placed upon them to manage both.

Trading is therefore a problematic activity, yet Twum-Danso Imoh et al. (2016) caution against deploying a deficit model of childhood, which focuses solely on the difficulties African children face and seems to ignore children's other experiences as shaped by age, class, gender and history. They suggest that historicising childhood and locating it at the heart of broad structures and forces of globalisation will help bridge the divide between the singularity and the plurality thesis that forms the core of the debate in childhood studies. The universal approach to childhood, Twum-Danso Imoh et al. (2016) argue, can miss the complex picture of African experience; within the dominant conception of childhood vulnerability, they say there is the less recognised but fascinating fortitude, resilience, creativity, thriving and adventurism, encapsulated in agency that African children employ to overcome everyday challenges. Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi (2013, p. 379) also highlight that children's agency and vulnerability are not opposing concepts and that both operate within and in response to 'relations of care and dependency'. Similar values and constructions of childhood can be seen in the Nigerian context of Oba Market, where children's ability to mediate the challenges of home, school and trading is striking. However, it can also be argued that ignoring children's vulnerability, particularly in relation to school attendance, can ultimately undermine attempts to implement children's rights in Nigeria.

As set out by the CRC, children need unique support and a recognition that what may be suitable for an adult may not necessarily be suitable for a child. Due to their vulnerability, children are at risk of harm, mistreatment, exploitation and/or neglect if they are not sufficiently cared for and protected by adults from the dangers outside and around the world (Chaudhary et al., 2014). These hazards are very apparent in trading. Children are not always fully able to appreciate their vulnerability, which makes them at greater risk of harm (Ayodele & Olubayo-Fatiregun, 2014). Other studies have suggested that vulnerable children do understand their environments and are able to participate to find solutions to their problems (Cisneros & Neumann, 2009). Although it is crucial to recognise such contributions, this agency should be harnessed in finding workable compromises to meet the challenges of children's competing demands, rather than being used to excuse the difficulties they face.

However, it is notable that greater recognition of children's agency can influence how childhood experiences are perceived. For example, it has been argued that encouraging children's participation in social movements about their rights (Rizzini & Klees, 2000; Rizzini & Thapliyal, 2007) plays a significant role in attitude change towards child labour. It is an example of how activism can change the meaning of child labour from being a virtue to being regarded as the violation of the child's rights (Gamlin & Pastor, 2009).

Trading takes place within a specific social context, which is underpinned by material constraints; therefore, any change must be twofold. First, it is unfair and unsustainable to outline a vision of rights that puts children in opposition to their families. Because children are inherently vulnerable and even more so when exposed to material deprivation, protecting them from trading is irrelevant if this sets

them against their caregivers, particularly given the dominant cultural emphasis on obedience. Any intervention that seeks to limit child labour or promote school attendance cannot succeed simply by informing children of rights that they lack the capacity to exercise; this generates resistance and discontent without power. Instead, parental attitudes towards child labour must transform. This will require a considerable shift in cultural values itself, entailing a very different approach to communication between stakeholders. Bourdillon and Carothers (2019, p. 392) argue that ‘...policies must be sensitive to children's specific situations if they are to be genuinely protective’.

Second, parental attitudes do not exist outside a context of material deprivation; the realities of this deprivation shape children's acceptance of trading. If the meaning and value attached to child labour is to alter, then alternatives must be economically sustainable. At one level, this could involve the state recognising and subsidising the costs of education over and above that of school fees. At another, it might entail stepping away from traditional western models of schooling, to allow education to coexist with space for a limited level of economic activity, for example, through legitimising certain regulated modes of labour and trading. It could also necessitate placing greater value on indigenous constructs of education, including knowledge gained in context rather than in the segregated sphere of school (White, 2012). However, this in itself must be carefully monitored in order to avoid the, often indirect, harms associated with child labour noted at the beginning of this paper.

CONCLUSION

Recognition of childhood as socially constructed has given greater emphasis to the agency and rights of children and young people (Tisdal & Punch, 2012). This study has explored constructions of childhood in the context of global transformations as experienced by children trading in one marketplace in Nigeria. As Kjørholt (2013, p. 246) notes, ‘Traditional cultures’; social practices of everyday life, as well as local notions of what it means to be a child, are in continuous transformation’. All settings are impacted by change in the wider world, but how this takes place varies considerably. In the marketplace, children and parents review and rewrite the boundaries of rights and responsibilities in relation to labour and education. Although obedience and acceptance strongly characterise children's experiences of trading, an element of resistance reflects children's position at the centre of competing discourses.

There is an element of intergenerational disconnect between parents and children. Future government initiatives could thus focus on offering support to parents in order to bridge this disconnect and reduce the complexity of competing roles that children face. Over time, this might increase children's opportunities to exercise their rights.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are available upon request from the authors.

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