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"We were victims of our families' uncooperative behavior": Problems Faced by School Dropouts in Rural Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Using the narratives by school dropouts, their parents, and teachers, this paper discusses the causes and consequences of dropping out of school. The paper demonstrates that some rural children in Ghana do not attend school due to cultural conventions on politeness, divorce, male privileges, poverty, the domestic role and economically viable ventures performed by children (with participation in such chores often overshadowing care and support for them), and weak teacher-student support system which prevents teachers from recognizing the factors hampering the children's education. To rectify this precarious situation, the paper calls on educators, policy makers, the Social Welfare Department, parents and students to work in concert with each other.

Keywords: dropouts, Ghana, narrative inquiry, family, impressionism, confessionalism

1. INTRODUCTION

Bhola (2000) notes that although efforts to improve the educational attendance and achievements of rural folks have been initiated in Ghana, some parts of the country (especially, the rural areas) are still not free from the precarious predicament of the lack of schooling. Obeng (2002) also observes that some Ghanaian rural children are not in school despite the fact that education is seen in Ghanaian society as a necessary tool for socio-economic advancement. In particular, she notes that abject poverty, ignorance, and outmoded customs often militate against children's advancement and this result in a situation whereby some rural Ghanaian children receive little or no education.

In the 1960s and again in the eighties declarations were made by many African governments to end illiteracy and to ensure education for all Africa's children by the year 2000. However, economic hardships and unworkable policies led to the collapse of many of Africa's civil society and educational systems. Efforts at mitigating the economic hardship and fixing the educational system and other infrastructure facilities have forced some African countries, such as Ghana, into joining the group of *Highly Indebted Poor Countries* (the world's poorest countries that are heavily in debt Countries that take the bold initiative to join this group have their debts canceled so that money could be made available for immediate development including education.

Because of Ghana's extreme poverty, the educational proclamation made in 1960 is now seen to have failed. School dropout rates in my research district (Kwaebibirim) have taken a nosedive and the trend is poised to continue**.** Several school age children in my research area receive little education and no secondary education and educators are at a loss regarding the accelerando tempo in which children drop out of school.

Obeng (2002) notes that to avert this catastrophe, it is imperative that stake holders in the educational process address the socio-political, cultural, and humanitarian factors militating against the proper education of these children. She notes that it is only a timely intervention by government, parents, and the school system that will free these children from this entrapment in under-education, illiteracy, ignorance, joblessness, and poverty. Given the very important role performed by rural folks in Ghanaian society, the consequence of this under-education and entrapment, unless mitigated, will spell doom for the nation's future.

2. AIM

This paper examines how parents' relationship with their children leads to school quitting or school withdrawal in a Ghanaian rural area (the Kwaebibrim School District). Specifically, the paper examines cultural practices and traditional values that lead students to drop out of school. In pursuing this concern, the paper makes a close and systematic synthesis and analysis of narratives by school dropouts, their parents, and their teachers.

3. LITERATURE ON CAUSES OF SCHOOL DROPOUT IN AFRICA (GHANA)

Ghana, like most Sub-Saharan African countries, has a compulsory education policy. A UNESCO report, *EFA Global Monitoring* (2005b), notes that the compulsory education age group in Ghana is 6–15. In 2001, 85% of children of school going age went to school; 86.3% were boys and 83.6% were girls. However, in my research area, the figures were nowhere near the national averages. My interaction with two head teachers of the schools in the area indicated that less than 75% of school going children enrolled in the school system. Of that, they estimated that less than two percent would receive Senior Secondary School education. The situation was worse in an Islamic Elementary School where the headmaster indicated that more than half of the girls would be withdrawn from school and given into marriage before they complete their education.

On school life expectancy (SLE)—that is, the expected number of years of formal schooling—a UNESCO report (*EFA Global Monitoring*, 2005b) shows

that the survival rate of schooling up to Grade 5 in Ghana in the year 2000 was 66.3%. In 2001, the SLE (in Ghana) was 7.5 years (8 years for boys and 6.9 years for girls). Although these figures show an improvement of the 1990 figures (6.5 years average SLE of which 7.5 years SLE for boys and 5.6 years SLE for girls), one can argue without any reservation that SLE in Ghana is still very low compared with an African country like Cameroon where in 2001 the total SLE was 9.3 years (10 years for boys and 8.5 years for girls).

Regarding school dropout in Ghana, a UNESCO (2005a) document shows that in the 1999/2000 school year 11.1% Grade 1 students dropped out of school. 6.6% dropped out in Grade 2, 8.2% in Grade 3, 10.7% in Grade 4 and 10.2% in Grade 5. Close observation of the UNESCO document also suggests that more girls dropped out of school in the 1999/2000 school years than did boys. For example, whereas 9.6% of boys in Grade 5 dropped out of school, 11% girls in Grade 5 girls dropped out.

In some African societies, and in Ghanaian society, in particular, numerous factors are known to cause school dropout. These factors include educational cost that poor rural parents have to bear in order to educate their children. Education is poorly supported in many African countries (Nikinyangi, 1980). In Ghana, for example, the lack of proper governmental support places a considerable economic burden (with regards to funding) on parents and children. According to Tomasevsky (2003), Ghana has a legal guarantee of free education. However, despite the legal guarantee primary school fees continue to be charged—a situation, which according to the school authorities, forces parents to withdraw their children from the school system.[1]

Because of parents' inability to support their children's education, the tendency has been for student girls to sleep with older men for money—a situation that often leads to early pregnancy and the girls consequently dropping out from school (Obeng, 2002; Camfed, 1994; Asomaning et al., 1994; Hallam, 1994; Palme, 1993; Fleuret et al. 1992; Brock and Cammish, 1991; and Bledsoe, 1990).

Furthermore, the need for some Ghanaian children to work to support their parents for survival also leads to a situation where parents may need young people to sell things in the open market (during school hours) instead of being in school.

Another problem leading to school dropout is early marriage. Obeng (2002) discovered that in some Ghanaian societies early marriage acts as a key to problems that follow girls into adulthood, a finding acknowledged in other research (Meena, 1994; and Peasgood et al. 1997). Obeng also noted that parents' fear of their daughters' pregnancy before they get married results in girls being given into marriage immediately before finishing high school. Akuffo (1987) and Yeboah (1993a, 1993b) attest to the above fact by identifying

[1] Quite recently (Ghana News Agency, 2005), Ghana's Minister of Education, Hon. Osafo Marfo, announced government's decision to pay user fees for all Ghanaian Elementary School students. If this decision is implemented, it will be a welcome relief for parents.

early marriage and child bearing as being some of the major problems facing adolescent females in some sub-Saharan African countries. In particular, Yeboah revealed that early pregnancy was a major cause of girls leaving school prematurely in some African countries. She discovered, in Ivory Coast, that twenty two percent of teenaged girls become pregnant and dropout of school. The teenage pregnancy is eighteen percent in Nigeria and Liberia.

Obeng (2002) noted also that some parents believe that girls getting more education will find it difficult to find husbands and that such woman are more likely to be disrespectful towards their husbands—a situation which will make it impossible for them to either get husbands or have successful marriages.

Among Ethiopian parents, Pauline Rose and Mercy Tembon (1999) also found that some parents believe that giving girls more education is way of destroying the girls' lives because educated girls have hard time, sometimes, in finding husbands: such women are seen as being too old for marriage, a fact also documented by Obeng (2002).

Alcohol and drug abuse can also be factors that can lead to students dropping out of school in Africa. Pupils who use drugs have discipline problems and cannot tolerate the punishment that goes with it and sometimes dropout of school (Ngau, 1991).

Furthermore Shona Wynd's (1999) study in Niger identified joblessness as an important factor for students dropping out of school; a fact also identified by Obeng's (2002) work on Ghana.

Lastly, Akuffo (1987) identified multiple grade retention, poor academic work, lack of interest in schooling, and traditional norms concerning sexuality as other reasons leading to dropping out of school in Ghana (See also Shepard and Smith (1986), and Byrnes and Yamamoto (1986) Matthews and Holmes (1984), Liberman (1980).

4. METHOD

Data for this study were collected in the summer of 2001. The data were collected in the Kwaebibirim School District of the Eastern Region of Ghana—the area stretching from Akwatia (an important diamond mining township) through Kade, the district capital, to Asuom (a multi-ethnic area with over a hundred settlements and a population of about two million). Residents are predominantly Akyem (Ghana) and several immigrants from neighboring West African countries like the Republic of Togo, Nigeria, Mali, Niger, Gambia, and Burkina Faso

The data collection involved personal interviews (with the school dropouts, their parents, and teachers) and participant observation in the community and its schools. In all, six school dropouts, twelve parents, and six teachers were interviewed in detail. Ten siblings were casually interviewed to cross check with what the main respondents said to be sure nothing was left out of the narratives.

In order to afford each interviewee the opportunity to interact freely without any problems all the interviewees were interviewed separately.

To firmly ground the research in a real context, I embarked on participant observation. I lived in the research site for many years and played various roles (a teacher, counselor, and children's advocate) and therefore counted myself as a member of the community. As an accepted member of the society, I was not a mere observer. Also, given the various roles I performed in the community, I understood the immediate and local meanings of participants' point of view, a view shared by Erikson (1986).

Also, cognizant of the participant observation and interviewing data collection methods, I depended on what I was told and refrained from mere observation as well as manipulating the behavior of the participants. Taking notes and interviewing the research participants had the advantage of lessening or eliminating any personal biases I may have had as a participant observer.

Learning the research participant's language made it possible for me to relate to them and them relating to me thereby eliminating misinterpretations and misapprehension that often characterize researchers work done in an unfamiliar culture.

The conversational style of interviewing was adopted in order for the participant to feel free to speak their mind. The informal conversational style of interviewing was very appropriate and effective because the respondents were able to relate to me in their own language. The informal conversation-type interview also generated a series of responses and that open to respondents' own interests.

Since the participant's siblings were interviewed also to cross check what they said this enabled me to predict whether the data were authentic or whether they were fabricated. I took all notes about all speech events involving the participants' life histories. Every effort was made to write down pertinent facts immediately and after relevant events.

Four of the case studies were discussed in Obeng (2002). In this paper, two case studies (involving two of the respondents, their families, and teachers) are closely examined; however, the claims made have validity to the other case studies and to the wider school district.

4.1 RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The research participants were selected from a Ghanaian rural area in the eastern part of the country. The participants were natives of the villages. The six students were selected based on my interaction with the principal of the school. He stated that those six students were recent dropouts in his school and that the reasons for their dropping out were identical.

5. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The study employs multiple theories in finding out how parent's relationship led to students dropping out of school. In particular I used strategies of the narrative inquiry (Jean Clandinin & Michael Connelly, 2000) and those of Van Mannen's (1988) Confessionalist and Impressionist traditions.

Writing from within their interest in personal experience methods in social science, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) develop a case for the study of narrative as a mode of inquiry. For them, social sciences are founded on the study of experience and therefore experience must be the starting point and a key term for all social science inquiry. They propose narrative and story telling as an alternative mode of inquiry, one that places them as centrally involved in the study of experience. They make assumptions that experience is both temporal and storied and argue that when individuals note something of their experience, either to themselves or others, they do so in story form. Stories, they argue, are the closest a researcher can come to real experience cognizant of the fact that they (stories) have a sense of being full and of coming out of the narrator's personal and social history. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note that experiences and expressions inform each other.

The narrative inquiry methodology was chosen because the study is positioned in the stories of my research participants and this helped me to understand their experiences. This is because the way people tell their stories and why they behave the way they do, give an accurate picture of the sequences of events in their lives (Polkinghorne, 1988). It is these events that help us understand the respondents' experiences. These experiences, although personal, have something to do with the respondents' social world (Dewey, 1938) and will help us link through to understand where the experiences took place be it in their homes, schools, or communities (Dewey, 1938).

The study is also done within the framework of Van Maanen's (1988) impressionism and Confessionalism**.** Being an impressionistic study, the participant's narratives are presented as I gathered them, with as much context as possible. The analytic claims are also based on the research participants' responses, claims, and assertions. I also try to situate the participant's answers in their real world to prevent misconception of their actions. Participant overall culture, their words, their speech acts and their interactional contexts are all deemed very important in this study.

The confessionalist approach is crucial to me in achieving some empathy with the participants. It also made it possible for me to bring my emic perspectives to bear on the analysis (as a former member of the community and a one-time practitioner in the school system). I was able to describe, explore, and analyze how the parent's relationships with their children led to children dropping out and the impact on their lives.

The Impressionistic model also enables us to understand why the participants took certain decisions and the forces that led them take such decisions. In

addition, by using the participants' own words and expressions, I am able to explore their aim(s) for their actions. To protect the identity of the research participants, pseudonyms are used to represent them.

6. CASE STUDIES

Each subsection is organized as follows: first, I provide my findings and then cite excerpts from the data to support or illustrate the findings/claims.

6.1 CASE STUDY I *NANA AKUA ASANTEWAA*

6.1.1 Findings

(a) There is unequal distribution of wealth and hence power and this places whoever controls the wealth and power at an advantage and the other(s) at a disadvantage. This wealth and power, if abused, or if not properly managed, can bring untold hardship on some members of the family.

(b) Wealth may be used as an entrapment tool and as a tool for subjugation.

(c) Husbands may not be a reliable source of support for wives and their children.

(d) Children may be caught in the 'cross-fire' from the greed, hostile, and uncompromising actions of their parents. Such actions not only leave social and emotional trauma on the children, they also dent and often permanently damage attempts at their education and put their future on hold.

(e) There are lineage groupings that create xenophobic reactions and actions as well as outright hostility and insensitivity toward other groups even if one's own children are in groups considered 'other.'

6.1.2 The Narratives

Nana Akua Asantewaa, a twelve-year-old girl had been out of school without a clue as to why her parents were not paying her school fees. She claimed that most of the time during the school year she and her siblings (her five sisters and brother and her four half sisters and brothers) stayed at home for a day or two due to non-payment of their school fees often due to a temporary financial burden that was often resolved quickly. But this time it is only Nana Akua herself and her sisters and brothers who have been at home for three months.

At the time of her interview (10:00 a.m. June, 2001) Nana was sitting at home with her old cloth wrapped around her tiny body. She looked quite miserable. She narrated her story as follows:

> It was one Monday morning when the head teacher {principal} of my school came to the classroom with a long list of those who had not paid their school fees. He mentioned two names and then mentioned mine and told me that I should stay home till my fees were paid in full. When I went home that day, I went straight to my father's house to inform him. My father told me that I should first inform my mother. I went straight home to inform my mother. My mother said "Okay" when I told her. I went to school the next two days, which was Tuesday and Wednesday, and the head teacher did not say anything. I guessed he was not in school. My head teacher comes to school either twice or thrice a week. On Thursday, the head teacher came in with another long list and informed me that my fees were not paid and that I should not come to school the following day. I told my mother when I went home and again, she simply said, "Okay, I will inform your father." Since that day I have been at home. I keep reminding my mother, but anytime that I remind her; she gives the same old answer, "Okay, I will inform your father." I also made a bold decision to go to my father's house one day to ask him about my school fees. He responded to my question by asking me once again to inform my mother. Now teacher (referring to the interviewer), I don't know when my parents will pay my fees. I am bored and I feel I will be very happy to be in school.

In my over ten years experience as a researcher in this area, I have discovered that blame shifting and parents' (especially divorced or separated parents) failure to accept total responsibility for their children's upbringing, especially their education, is rampant. Given the agrarian nature of the community and the high cost of labor, family members (children and wives) constitute the labor force of most families so any separation or divorce results in loss of labor and hence withdrawal of support by parents (especially, fathers).

Regarding performance at school, Nana Akua said she was doing fine in most of her subjects and was only having trouble with *Reading*. Nana noted that only two of her classmates could read; the rest could not. Poor reading skill is a serious academic problem throughout Ghana and is not exclusive to Nana's school. Ngau's (1991) work on grade retention and dropout in Kenya cited children's inability to read properly as the most common problem. She also stated that poor reading caused students to repeat a grade or to drop out.

During her June 2001 interview, Nana was still looking forward to the day her parents would pay her fees. She thought she would be better off in school than at home. At least, at school, she will not have the responsibility of looking after her two younger siblings, aged 8, and 10 who happen to be sleeping at the time of the interview. She explained to me that it was her responsibility to help her siblings bathe, give them some food, and then go outside with them to sell

soap. At that point I asked her where her mother was and she said her mother and her two older siblings were at the farm and would come home around four o' clock. She said that she was in the sixth grade and that her two older siblings were in grades seven and eight, while the two younger ones were in the second and fourth grades respectively.

In the research area, it is common for older children to baby-sit younger siblings to free parents, especially mothers, to engage in full time employment. It is also a common practice for children, especially girls, to engage in some form of trading to help raise the families' income or budget. Boys normally help on the farm to ensure self-sufficiency in food production (see also Rose and Tembon, 1999). The overwhelming reliance on one's own children for assistance makes the developmental cycle an appropriate explanatory framework for domestic strategies (Clark, 1994).

Nana's Parents

Ama (Mother)

During the interview with Nana's parents, I asked them why all their five children were out of school. Nana's mother said she was married to her ex-husband for seventeen years. After giving birth to their second daughter her husband told her that he would not be able to live alone while his wife stayed with her parents. In Akan society, it is normal for a woman to move to her mother's house when she gives birth so that the mother will assist her in the first three months after delivery.

It was during the time Ama was staying with her parents that her husband indicated that he had seen a young woman that he wanted to marry and that as custom demands, he would give her a new cloth as compensation. In Akan society, a man is supposed to compensate his wife or wives if he decides to take on a new wife. The senior wife may or may not accept the compensation; but refusal to accept the compensation cannot prevent/deter the man from seeking the new wife. The obverse does not hold. Specifically, a woman cannot take on a second husband even if she is capable of looking after them both. Mere mention of polyandry is tabooed and its practice could lead to excommunication.

Ama Frimpomaa, Nana's mother, noted that news about her husband's decision to take on another wife came to her as a surprise. She noted:

> Teacher, (referring to me) the news came to me as a surprise. When I saw my husband coming to my mother's house, I thought he was coming to visit. Unfortunately, this was not the case; instead, he came with ' bad news ' I would never forget that day!

Ama told me that her ex-husband got married soon after the birth of her son. She said that when her husband informed her of his upcoming marriage she did everything she could to persuade him to rescind the decision but he did not listen. Despite an intervention by Ama's parents, her husband's own parents, and their family friends, Ama's husband remained unrepentant and resolved.

Ama explained that her woes was due in part to the fact that most men, and even women, in the research area saw nothing wrong with polygamy and viewed a woman who prevented her husband from taking on additional wives as unreasonable. She explained:

> Teacher (referring to me) since some of the men in the village, including the junior secondary headmaster, have more than one wife anyone I asked to plead with my ex-husband not to get another wife thought my actions were unnecessary. They felt it was no big deal for a man to have more than one wife. It is important to mention the fact that some closely related friends and relatives of mine also see nothing wrong with polygamy. I personally find this sort of behavior as being insincere but in this society it is acceptable. What I kept telling my ex-husband at the time was that there are some men in the village who have only one wife and who have their peace of mind than those with two or more wives. Anyway, my husband got married to the young woman and has had children with her.
>
> Now, teacher, let me tell you the reason why our children are at home. My husband came to me around Christmas time last year and said he had seen another beautiful young woman and he wanted to marry her. This revelation came to me as a shock, I mean if two wives were not good enough for him how can three be enough! There appears to be no limit. He is poised to go on forever.

At that moment Ama described her ex-husband as a man with no brain in his head. She thinks that with two wives and nine children, her ex-husband was struggling to take care of the home. She noted:

> At the time that I was married to him I had only two cloths one to wear at home and one to take to the farm. I even stopped going out to important ceremonies (like funerals and naming ceremonies) because I did not have any decent clothing and my children too did not have any decent clothing either.

Ama sought divorce when her ex-husband refused her advice and married a third wife. After the divorce, Ama's ex-husband tried all possible means to get her back but she swore by the river god's oath never to return to his house. In most traditional African settings, and more especially in my research area, oath swearing and the consequent curse and financial burden associated with it, makes it an important discursive and juridical tool. In Ama's case, swearing by the river god was an important oath that could not be easily broken without dire consequences (see El-Shamy, 1972 about the consequences of oath-taking in Africa). Invoking the oath empowers the oath taker in several ways since it proves to the other participants that the oath-speaker means business, is truthful, is desperate, or is seeking justice. It is thus a cultural praxis or ritual with considerable socio-political implications and consequences.

To get her back, Ama's husband resorted to imposing socio-economic sanctions on her by banning her from going to their farm (despite the fact that she planted all the crops on the farm), asking her to return the cloth he had bought for her, and most severely, refusing to pay the children's school fees. Although Ama was unhappy that her children were unable to attend school, she still stood by her decision not to remarry her ex-husband.

Kofi Mensah (Father)

Nana's father, Mr. Kofi Mensah, was also interviewed a week after his ex-wife's interview. He told me that he was not worried about his children not going to school. In his own words:

> It is the woman who stays in a marriage whose children are looked after. If Ama decides not to come back I will never pay her children's school fees. Her children are not the only children that I have.

He said both of his wives were pregnant; thus, he would be getting more children. He saw his ex-wife as a "greedy" and an uncompromising woman whose behavior was unheard of. He felt it was normal for the men in the village to have more than one wife and it is only "wise" men, like himself, that more women would like to marry. During the interview, he boasted: Teacher have you ever seen a woman getting married to an irresponsible man." I then informed him that responsibility is not tied to having more wives but rather having children and educating them. At that point he laughed and said:

> Teacher your education is making you think differently than us. I was about to tell you to go and convince my beloved ex-wife (Ama) to come back. She will still qualify for the coveted and enviable position of first wife. Since that is the dream of every woman in the village.

I replied that as a woman and educator I would like to see Ama's children get educated. At that point he said:

> Teacher {he laughed again}, don't try to convince me to put the children back in school. It might be better for you to rather convince my ex-wife to come back to me. Until she returns, I will not even provide the children with money for food and clothing let alone educate them.

From the above excerpt and other excerpts in his narrative, several issues may be raised with the most important of them being the fact that it is children whose mothers remain in a marriage who are supported by their fathers. Those whose mothers are divorced may be ignored and not supported at school. Here, we see children being used as a coercive tool to subjugate and perpetuate irrational and oppressive behaviors under the banner of culture and custom. Not only are the children's livelihoods threatened, there is a possibility for them to be left with permanent emotional scars that could follow them into adulthood.

Mr. Seth Amoako

Nana's teacher, Mr. Seth Amoako, was also interviewed about Nana's situation. At the time of the interview, Mr. Amoako had had over thirty years of teaching experience in both Elementary and Junior Secondary School teaching. He was the head teacher of the only school in the village. Mr. Amoako indicated that Nana's father had not been quite prompt in his payment of his children's school fees and sometimes his children had had to stay home for a couple of days, a practice considered normal in the village for a man with many children and an unstable income. Mr. Amoako indicated further that it was a normal practice to send the school children home for them to collect their fees because some parents will not make the payments unless the school took such a measure. This practice, however, is contrary to government policy on fee payment and school attendance. Specifically, although the Ghanaian government policy bars teachers from sending students home for non-payment of school fees, in order for school administrators to run the schools effectively they use all possible means including sending students home. Use of this hard-line measure is also due in part to lack of proper support of the schools by the government (Tomasevsky, 2003). Ngau (1991) found a similar situation in Kenya.

Mr. Amoako noted that even after sending the children home several times some of the parents were still unable to pay the fees and consequently their children had to drop out of school. He said the unfortunate situation was when the students had to sit for the national exams (Basic Education Certificate Examination). For Junior Secondary School graduates, the fee for the exams is ten times that of the regular school fees and many parents cannot afford the fees. Those who have no money and want their children to complete Junior Secondary School sometimes have to sell some of their family heirlooms like *kente* cloth and other property like part of their cocoa farm or land to pay the fees. Mr. Amoako also noted that payment of the fees is such a big problem that it also leads to dropouts, school withdrawal, and class repetition.

However, Mr. Amoako noted that the withdrawal of Nana and her siblings was not attributable to poverty, but rather, to the divorce of their parents. Mr. Amoako had personally intervened on behalf of Nana but to no avail. In Mr. Amoako's own words:

> This man (referring to Nana's father) has no love for his children. He strongly believes that the children's welfare is the responsibility of their mother because when they are educated they would care for their mother (but not him) when he is old. Because of the matrilineal lineage system in this community many men make the mistake of thinking that because their children are not members their lineage even if they educate such children, in their old age, the children will only take care of their mothers and ignore them (the fathers). The only thing that will change Nana's father decision is his wife (Nana's mother) remarrying him.

Important claims that can be made from Mr. Amoako's statements include the following: First, there are cultural perceptions on lineage co-membership and on who should benefit from whom within and outside of a lineage. An important point associated with lineage co-membership is the question of identity and the costs and rewards for members and non-members. Members of a group, like birds of a feather, flock together and help to support and sustain one another in youth and in old age. The lineage membership concept and practice have implications for social theory, criminal justice, and policy studies.

On social theory, we learn that there are sub-group "isms" within the broad concept of collectivism. Thus, despite the fact that the Ghanaian society is seen as collectivist as opposed to say western individualism, we observe individualist-like structures forming. This may either be an indication of social change and transformation or plain irresponsibility. In this particular case, we see a parent looking at his own interest without regard to his children's welfare. Furthermore, we observe that negotiations and allegiance within sub-groups take precedence over those of the bigger collective whole.

On criminal justice, the concept of what constitutes a crime is brought to the fore. Should such parents (fathers) as Mr. Kofi Mensah be seen as criminals? Should they be prosecuted or, should the custom and tradition be blamed? In effect, who is to blame for the plight of the children: tradition (society), or the individual(s)?

6.2 CASE STUDY II *AKUA NKRUMAH*

6.2.1 FINDINGS

A close and systematic observation of the narratives suggests that:

a) Respondents used respect for authority as a tool to determine whether a child should or should not be supported. A child viewed as arrogant was withdrawn from school.
b) Respondents used cultural maxims like proverbs to justify their course of action.
c) Some teachers do not offer as much support (to students) as needed by the students.

6.2.2 The Narratives

Akua Nkrumah, also known as *Obaa pa* 'Good woman' was gorgeously dressed when I met her on the street. Akua is a hawker who sells powder, combs, pomade and other such items on the street. I tried to arrange a meeting with her in her home but she refused and insisted that instead we sit under a shady tree. Later I learned from her parents that she was hanging out with her friends. Akua dropped out of school four months prior to our interview. According to her, she

dropped out of school because she was not getting support from anybody—all her parents did, she noted, was to complain. She indicated that she used school hours to do household chores and that was why she escaped from home. Following her departure from home, the parents refused to spend any money on her education. Akua noted:

> My older brothers and sister were just as indifferent to my schooling considering they had all dropped out. Plus, I could neither read nor write anyway. I could not write my name let alone read it. My teachers were very unsupportive, and once a teacher even described me as useless. Teacher (referring to me), will you mingle with people who do not care the hoot about you and consider you useless?

Akua spent eight years in school but at the time she dropped out she was officially only in Grade Five. She said she was older and taller than almost all the people in her class. She repeated grades two through four. Grade retention, and thus, over grown children, is not found in Akua's school only. USAID Education profiles for Africa indicates that grade repetition is common in several African countries despite the fact that it is not an official policy in most countries (including Ghana). It is quite common for parents to request that their wards be made to repeat classes if they think their child/children are not making any headway in their studies.

Akua noted that she dropped out of school when she discovered that her parents would make her repeat Grade Five. At the time of her dropping out, she was getting Grade F in all her classes. She was fed up with school and was tired of the other children teasing her. Akua explained that any word she mispronounced in class was turned into a nickname for her and was used to ridicule her. Even her teachers occasionally laughed at her attempts to read. She realized she had more respect in the community as a trader than a Fifth Grade failure. It must be pointed out that Akua sounded more intelligent than she described herself and was cheerful throughout the interview.

During my initial contact with Akua's parents (Mr. Amoh and Madam Afia Dapaa) both were unwilling to be interviewed about her. They stated that they had nothing to say about her because she was very disrespectful toward them when she lived with them. At that point I asked them if they knew where she was currently living. Her mother claimed that she knew Akua was living with some older friends of hers and was in good hands.

On my second visit, both parents agreed to be interviewed under one condition—I should advise Akua to change her arrogant behavior and to become respectful toward them. I obliged by promising to advise her and the interview took place in their house that morning.

Mr. Amoh

During the interview Mr. Amoh could not hide his anger toward his daughter. He repeatedly pointed out how Akua's behavior had tarnished his image and the

image of his nuclear family. He indicated that, in it was an abomination, in the village, for a girl to refuse the orders of her parents and to plainly verbalize such refusal. He noted:

> Teacher, not only was Akua very lazy when she lived at home, she was very stubborn, arrogant, and a bad influence on her siblings. Akua did not participate in the household chores like cooking and cleaning[2] She, in fact, discouraged the other children from participating in such activities. Teacher, tell me, will you spend money on a disobedient child? I believe strongly that financial and material support should be withdrawn from such a child. As our ancestors rightly put it, "A child who denies her parents sleep must also be denied sleep." Akua, by her actions, denied us sleep (respect and comfort) so we also had to deny her sleep (financial and parental support).
>
> Now she is in the world and is suffering from the consequences of her disobedience. Her classmates will finish school and become teachers like you or even doctors and important people. It is at that time that she will realize how much her arrogance has cost her.

On whether he knew where Akua lived and would be willing to take her back if she changed her behavior, Mr. Amoh responded with two proverbs:

> Madam, on the question about where Akua lives, my response is quite simple: "if a vagabond leaves her home, she stays with other vagabonds." Akua lives with other hobos and together, they have become the laugh and talk of the village. It's sad but that's the obvious end of an arrogant person. If you sow in arrogance, you reap nothingness and desperation.
>
> Will I take her back if she changes her ways? Well, she will have to prove to me that she has actually reformed. You see, "a goat can never become a sheep." She may pretend to have changed but I sincerely doubt whether she can or will ever change. Teacher, to be honest with you, I've given up on her. She is a failure and I don't waste my time and money on failures.

From Mr. Amoh's stretches of utterance, it is apparent that his mind (about Akua's education) was made up. He saw her 'arrogance' as a reason not to help her to continue her education. He also put the blame squarely on Akua. As far as he was concerned, respect for authority was a necessary condition for receiving support from one's parents and no matter how well a child does at school, support must be withdrawn if the child demonstrates or even exhibits minor signs of arrogance or a disrespectful behavior.

[2] Akua vehemently denied this accusation.

Madam Afia Dapaa

My interaction with Afia, Akua's mother, confirmed most of the things her husband, Mr. Amoh said. Afia explained that Akua's laziness (at home) was the main reason why they stopped her school fees payments. She said that the main incident that forced them to stop the payment occurred when Akua refused to take food to her grandmother. Afia stated:

> Auntie (a deferential term for women), Akua was so lazy and arrogant that when I asked her to take food to her grandmother she boldly and defiantly told me "Nothing will ever make me take the food to my grandmother." Teacher, isn't this act of request refusal, viewed as an act of defiance and hence a big insult to me and to her father? I know you have children and my question to you is: "Will you continue to support a child who continuously refuses to obey your commands? Isn't it the case that, as our elders put it, "it is a child who has or shows the tendency to support her parents in their old age who must be supported?"
>
> Well, Akua has by her actions, jumped over a conflagration and blown dust and ashes into her own eyes. She has proved beyond any doubt whatsoever that she will abandon us in our old age and this is why we stopped the payment of her school fees.

I told Akua's mother that I would have forgiven Akua and continue to help educate her since it is not uncommon for teenagers to be rebellious. At that point, she said:

> I think part of the problem comes from you the teachers. You pamper the children at school and when they come home, they want to be pampered. Teacher, if a child misbehaves, you don't buy her an ice cream or a toffee; you discipline her. This discipline that we meted out to Akua was appropriate. If she were wise, she would have repented and apologized.

At that point, I asked if I could apologize on Akua's behalf. To that request, she responded:

> The decision to withdraw support has already been taken. We will not change our minds. We've seen enough of her arrogance. You see, Teacher, with children one has to be firm. If you keep changing your mind, they interpret that to mean weakness. Teacher, I like all my children equally but I will not tolerate any act of insolence.

From the above excerpts and other similar excerpts identified in the interview, it was evident that Akua's parents were determined not to support her in her schooling. It also points to the considerable weight put on respect as a yardstick for determining whether or not children are supported by their parents as well as the consequences for what is perceived as 'bad' behavior.

Mr. Tano

> "Money wasted on a hopeless situation could be better spent on a useful or viable project"

Mr. Tano, Akua's teacher, was briefly interviewed about Akua's withdrawal from school. He noted that he knew that Akua was not in school but he did not know precisely why she was not attending class. I asked him why he had not inquired about Akua's absence. He laughed and told me that Akua should have dropped out of school a long time age. He said:

> I did not know why she was wasting her time. Madam (referring to me) Akua was not doing well in a single subject. Whenever it was time to fill in the report cards, hers was always easy to complete. All F's; she failed all the subjects. She always came to class late. In fact, it was characteristic of her to wait till everybody was in class before she made a grand appearance overly groomed as though attending a wedding or something of that nature.

From my conversation with Mr. Tano I realized that Akua's description of her teachers as uncaring was completely true. On several occasions I asked Mr. Tano if he had made any effort to advise or help Akua perform better in school. His response was always:

> You do not need to waste your time on such a student since she will drop out anyway. In this part of the world where money is difficult, if not impossible to come by, money wasted on a hopeless situation such as Akua's, is better spent on a useful project such as farming. You know, Madam, a child doomed to fail in life will never prosper no matter how much money and energy are spent on her. Some of these children are sent by the devil to make life unbearable and uncomfortable for their parents. The earlier a parent deals with them, the more peaceful the parent's life becomes. Don't you know the proverb that says if a stump will pierce your eye you must uproot it, not cut it halfway? Akua's parents were wasting their money on her and the best thing that ever happened to them was their decision to stop wasting money on her.

An observation of the above narratives points to the fact that cultural conventions on politeness (see Samuel Obeng, 2002, 2003) play a significant role in determining whether or not a child will be supported by her parents Politeness plays a significant role in most facets of Akan life. It is used as an important, and probably the only, yardstick for determining which child should or should not be supported financially and emotionally. In Akua's case, her refusal to carry out her mother's instructions/request was seen as an act of laziness, a show of arrogance, and hence, a recipe for financial and social support withdrawal.

Not only is request refusal by children seen as a disrespectful behavior; it is also seen as an abominable act. An act viewed as writing on the wall saying "I have come of age; and I don't need to take instructions from anybody. I'll do things my own way." The fact that both parents are agreeable on the stringent action they took (withdrawing support) points to the fact that financial and other support systems could be used as social control measures despite their unpleasant consequences.

It may also be claimed, based on the above narratives, that, cultural maxims such as proverbs may be used to justify the unjustifiable. Here, it is important to note that in my research area, proverbs are seen as cultural truisms since they are attributed to the sages and that and their cultural import is not contestable.

We also learn form the above narratives that the teacher-student-support system is rather weak and needs fixing. Not only did Mr. Tano not seem enthusiastic about Akua's schooling, he failed to offer the necessary counseling and emotional support to both Akua and her parents. He, in fact, saw Akua's parents' actions as justifiable. Mr. Tano's behavior has implications for teacher training and educational policy. In particular, it suggests that there ought to be a much tighter cohesion between families and the school system when it comes to matters relating to discipline, grade retention, and social deviance and control. It also points to the need to include or intensify counseling as an important part of teacher education.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This study has shown that dropping out of school may be due to a combination of factors including male privileges, such as controlling most of the power (wealth or socio-economic, politico-legal and ideological resources) in families, misusing this power for their personal advantage by forcing children (and sometimes, even women) into submission failure of which often results in the suffering and punishment of the children. With women and children locked into particular stereotypical positions of subordination (Said, 1978), and often excluded from most decision-making processes, even mild protests and request refusals are often viewed as sheer unreasonableness on the part of the women and children and various persuasive and often coercive strategies are employed to make them submit. The above problem can be mitigated if parents are educated about the significance of education and about the need not to use fees non-payment as a social control measure.

The case studies discussed in the core sections of this paper also point to the fact that any attempt at improving school retention should be holistic. In particular, the individual, her immediate social group, and the entire society should take into consideration. Also any attempt at addressing school dropout in African villages must take a close look at poverty minimization or its total elimination.

Because of the important domestic role of children participating in household chores and other economically viable ventures, parents use this role as an important yardstick for determining whether or not children should be supported at school. Participation in such chores may in fact overshadow care and support for children. What is troubling with this kind of situation is that heavy burden continues to be put on children and this, by and large, affects their studies. Sadly, not even teachers appear to see or recognize this as hampering the children's education.

Obeng (2002) mentioned the fact that division of family responsibilities, real and often imaginary, can also be blamed, in part, for children dropping out of school. This study has lent some credence to that claim. From the narratives, we gathered that payment of school fees was seen as a responsibility of the fathers hence their refusal to pay meant no real attempt was made on the part of the mother to salvage the situation. Thus, the gender division of labor and of responsibilities may be used as an excuse to explain the futility of children's education.

An important part of this study has been the reliance on methodologies (narrative inquiry, impressionism, and Confessionalism) that provided a means of reflecting upon and analyzing the data generated 'in action.' These methodologies enabled me to understand the respondents' current actions and subsequently enabled me to project their future actions.

Reporting the research respondents' perspectives is a significant departure from most studies on education in Africa in which the researchers' perspectives are reported in the findings. My incorporation of the research respondents' perspectives has given them a voice and for a moment prevented the researcher-centric nature of such studies. Incorporating their perspectives has given us insights into how they got to where they are now, the problems they went through and how they dealt with and continued to deal with their problems. Given the heavy reliance on the interpretations provided by the respondents, this study has sought to reveal the socio-cultural and educational crises through the communities' own lenses and collective reconstruction The study has therefore shown a clear view of participants' perceptions and by this revealed how such views and perceptions contest with each other and with societal views and/or norms of behavior.

Given the linguistic and ethnic diversity in Ghana and more especially, cognizant of the varying cultural constraints in different parts of Ghana, it is important to mention the fact that, the claims made in this study have validity in only the research area. It is most likely that the situation in the northern part of the country might be worse given the unspeakable poverty in the northern part of the country.

It is anticipated that while the insights provided by this study will provide a source of information for educators, parents, and ethnographers interested in the well being of rural children, it will also be of use to social workers and social psychologists, especially, family counselors.

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