

# A Study of Socio-economic Factors and Role of Extended Family in Children's Basic Education in Rural Ghana: The Case of Effutu Municipality

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## Abstract

The decentralized system of education delivery in Ghana through the Central government or the Ministry of Education has created space for understanding of how schools and communities should operate and how communities should assume an important role in schools but less on how informal bodies should be backed with the requisite support to be actively involved in their children's education. This creates a policy and practice gap which is more pronounced in poor rural communities and Effutu Municipality is no exception. In recognition of this, the study sought to explore the role of the extended family in resource constraint communities from the perspectives of individual parents in two schools in a rural Ghana. The case study adopted a qualitative method of interviews with twelve parents to gain understanding of their involvement in children's education including the socio-economic challenges within such context. Additional data were collected through interviews with teachers. The data were analysed through coding to identify themes. The study findings reveal that in rural communities, the notion of parents goes beyond the biological parent to wider family and community networks in part as a result of seasonal migration. It identified grandparents, mothers in particular as playing a vital role in children's education. Consequently, the study recommends that policies on education decentralization should reflect the local factors which impact on extended family's role in children's education.

**Keywords:** Extended family role, socio-economic challenges, community networks, and individual parents

## 1 Introduction

In developing contexts such as Ghana, the extended family also links with poverty which affects the capacity to be fully involved in a child's education. According to Powell et al., (2004, p.7), over 98 % of children in developing countries separated from their parents by reason of death or other causes live under the care of other members of the extended family. Even when one or both parents are alive, a fair number of vulnerable youngsters live with people who are not their biological parent. The literature shows that this tradition is waning as a result of the reduced capacity of the extended family safety net to care for the increasing number of vulnerable children (UNICEF, 2003). As United Nations Children Education Fund (UNICEF) (2003) acknowledges,

This traditional support system is under severe pressure and in many instances has already been overwhelmed, increasingly impoverished and rendered unable to provide adequate care for children (p.14)

According to UNICEF (2003), households accommodating orphans are more likely to become poor, mainly due to high dependency ratios and without support, the extended family system will continue to have negative consequences for children.

In Ghana, the dynamics of the extended family system make the definition of 'parent' rather fluid; it is very common for children to live with relatives who are not their biological parents but who assume responsibility for the upkeep of the child, including their schooling (GSS, 2000). The notion of parent includes other members of the family, such as grandparents, older siblings, aunts and uncles, close family friends, neighbours and members of the community who care about the child's education or more. In the coastal areas of Ghana, many parents are seasonal migrants who leave their children in the care of relatives to enable them to provide for family sustenance (Care International, 2003).

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

In spite of the numerous role played by the extended family in rural communities, it appears educational policy does not adequately cater for challenges that confront it in a bid to cater for children's education. Even though the introduction of the capitation grant policy in Ghana in 2005 made public school fee 'free', other explicit direct costs such as feeding at school and uniforms constitute a barrier to access to schooling to poor households (Akyeampong et al., 2007). In farming communities in particular, parents expressly requested that teachers allow them to take their children out of school to take care of their younger siblings so that the adults could work on the farm for family sustenance. Such practices are driven by economic need as well as a culture of intergenerational obligation, support and reciprocity (Keiland and Toro, 2006). The focus of the study was to explore how extended family members as proxy parents confront these challenges which impact on their

involvement in children's education.

### **1.2 Research Questions**

In order to guide the study, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ 1: What role does extended family play as proxy parents in the study communities?

RQ 2: What challenges confront the extended family members?

### **1.3 Significance of the Study**

The significance of parental involvement in Ghana is highly emphasised in the 1987 educational reforms and FCUBE introduced in 1995 which prescribe the involvement of SMCs and PTAs to collaborate with head teachers in school policy (GES, 2001), therefore the study would enrich the existing literature. The findings and recommendations will provide useful information to education managers about how best to involve parents in children's schooling and education. The study findings and conclusion will also facilitate policies to address concerns of parents in resource constraint communities such as this context.

## **2 Related Literature**

In rural communities where the major economic activity is subsistence agriculture, the opportunity cost of schooling to households would relate to lost earning from child's labour in agriculture or in home productive activities (Bray, 1996; Blunch and Verner, 2000). This type of cost increases with age and gender of the child. Older siblings are more likely to be made to work to support younger siblings, while girls are more likely to be made to take care of younger siblings or support parents in household chores than boys and so have lower opportunity costs (Canagarajah and Coulombe, 1997; Mason and Rozelle, 1998). Besides, understanding the nature of children's time, not just its value, but the alternative use of their time is significant to their schooling decisions – particularly when school activities clash with major economic activity that is important to the household survival. For example, in the fishing and farming rural communities in Africa, it is not uncommon for children to absent themselves from school due to bumper fish harvest or during the planting and harvesting seasons (Brown, 2005). Quartey (2007) found that most women particularly single-mothers experienced greater economic difficulties. It may be concluded that the inability of parents to involve themselves in their children's schooling can be attributed in part to straitened economic circumstances (Canagarajah and Coulombe, 1997).

## **3 Methodology**

### **3.1 Research Context**

The study was conducted in two school communities in rural Effutu municipality in Ghana's Central Region. According to the Poverty Profile of Ghana in the 1990s, Central Region is the poorest region in southern Ghana (GSS, 2000). Vulnerability to poverty in Effutu Municipality is further deepened by low returns on fishing which is the major occupation of the people of Effutu Municipality (Brown, 2005). The municipality has a total population of 68,597, which amounts to about 3.1 per cent of the total population of the region (GSS, 2010). The major economic activities are farming and fishing, with full occupational distribution showing that 49 per cent are involved in fishing, 22 per cent in farming and 29 per cent in commerce (GSS, 2010). The choice of Effutu Municipality for this study was informed by the fact that in most rural areas, school children engage in commercial activities, mostly to support their families and themselves (Casely-Hayford, 2002; MOE, 2005). Considering the potential impact this could have on schooling and parental involvement in school governance, it seemed useful to explore how this challenge was addressed. Two schools that represented the municipality's two broad livelihood profiles' engagement in fishing and farming (School 1) and trading and commerce (School 2) were selected for the study.

### **3.2 Research Design**

In selecting parents, I looked at two groups: those formally involved in SMC and PTA activities; and those informally engaged in school activities, programmes and events, such as speech day and prize-giving day and inter-school competitions. For each of the two study schools, I aimed at three participants from each of the two groups of parents. Thus, altogether, I aimed at 12 parent interviewees. I also aimed at a broad representation of the term 'parent' and a mix of literate and illiterate individuals since available literature in Ghana supports the inclusion of all education levels in parental engagement in basic schooling (GLSS, 2008; GSS, 2010).

I identified parents for interview by means of the snowball method of sampling which is also known as network, chain referral, or reputational sampling (Blaikie, 2000). With this method, the researcher gain access to prospective study participants through contact information supplied by those already engaged (Blaikie, 2000). According to Noy (2008), in order to generate a sample consisting of a specific group of participants, the researcher must rely on the assistance of an actual informant to identify other individuals for interview, who, in turn, become informants themselves. Cohen et al., (2007) indicate that the snowball is useful in a context in

which it is difficult to obtain access to a given population due to the sensitive nature of the research topic. I thus adopted this technique to select parents for the study due to difficulty in gaining access to participants with limited involvement unaided. In furtherance of this, 6 participants from Focus Group 1 were recruited as starting point for the generation of the one- on-one interview sample who were asked to identify 6 other potential participants, who were then informally involved in the chain referral process until the target of 12 was reached.

Each parent thus selected was interviewed once on the understanding that I might need to conduct a short follow-up session to clarify anything outstanding if this seemed appropriate and the participant was willing. Twelve parents were interviewed, six at School 1 and six at School 2. Of these, seven were women and five were men. There were more women in School 1 than School 2. Four were mothers and two were fathers at School 1. Two were mothers; three were fathers and one aunt (an extended family member) in School 2 which reflects the definition of a parent in this context as discussed in chapter two. Details of parent participants are as shown in Table 4.3 below:

### 3.3 Data Analysis

I began the process of data analysis after all the audio-recorded parent interviews had been fully transcribed as agreed by the participants. The process involved in data transcription and analysis was as follows: I transcribed and analysed parent interview data in school 1 and 2 communities, comparing and contrasting data to identify emerging themes. The first step was the identification of codes. Coding has been described as a means of identifying and labelling concepts and phrases in interview transcripts and field notes (Miles and Huberman, 1994). . Every response of each participant was checked and assigned a code, a process that generated several codes for the interview transcript. The initial codes were listed on separate sheets of paper after which they were compared, sorted and grouped. The groups of codes were then summarised into broad themes for the analysis. These included: socio-economic factors, role of the extended family and seasonal migration and practice of preference for boy-child education.

## 4 Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Socio-economic factors and the role of the Extended Family

As discussed in the literature review, in Ghana, the dynamics of the extended family system make the definition of 'parent' rather fluid as it is common for children to live with relatives who are not biological parents but who assume responsibility for the upkeep of the child including their schooling. In the case of rural Ghana, the definition of 'parent' is also linked with the impact of migration as many parents are seasonal migrants who leave their children in the care of relatives to enable them to provide for family sustenance (Addae-Boahene and Arkorful, 1999; Powell et al., 2004). Consistent with this, the responses gathered from parent interviews suggested that adult family members specifically grandmothers played a vital role either as on-going caretakers of pupils or momentarily when demands of parents took them away from home.

When parents were asked why their own parents took over the care of their wards school attendance, homework and other school activities at certain times of the year, the responses were varied and diverse. One single father noted:

During some seasons, I migrate... to do fishing. Sometimes I live there for eight months before coming back home; it all depends on how long the fishing season in that place lasts. In my absence, my mother takes care of the children [Parent 5, School 1]

This suggests that the economic activities of the people are predominantly fishing and that due to the nature of this economic activity, migration is common place. It also suggests that grandmothers were in charge of the upkeep of children when the biological parents were away from home. One aunt also indicated the importance of the extended family in the survival of the households:

My trading business takes me around the country to such major markets... The duration of each trip, depends on how long it takes to sell my farm produce. In my absence, my mother takes care of the child [Parent 6, School 2]

The above quote also underscores the importance of the extended family system and how this links to particular values. A child belongs to the extended family, not his/her biological parent so everyone does what they can to help in the child's upbringing (Addae-Boahene and Arkorful, 1999; GSS, 2000). Another mother noted:

My brother, if living conditions here were good, why would I travel out for long periods? If the children themselves are to be fed well or remain in school, I have no choice than to relocate from time to time plying my trade. Fortunately, my old lady is quite healthy and strong so she takes care of the children while I am away [Parent 2, School 1]

The above quote suggests that parents, mothers in particular, migrate in pursuit of trading activities to provide

for family sustenance and according to them, they do so due to poor living conditions in rural areas, leaving behind grandmothers to care for their children. Thus, when the exigencies of survival compel parents to leave home either on short or long trips, grandmothers take over the responsibility of caring for the children. In both school communities, it was not uncommon to find adult members of the extended family step in to provide assistance whenever, for one reason or another biological parents were unable to perform one or other chores

Interviews, nevertheless, suggested that parents were keenly aware of the limitations of grandparents in spite of their willingness to assist with childcare. Physical frailties associated with aging as well as the low literacy levels ensuing from the centuries-old preference for boy-child education, mean that grandmothers, in particular, are sometimes handicapped, in carrying out these chores. As one parent, a father commented:

I'm aware that my mother is old and unlettered but if I don't relocate to do fishing the survival of the entire family will be seriously jeopardized. I would have wished to do fishing permanently here in this community, but the reality is that the fishing work entails seasonal migration and my great-great grandparents migrated from time to time [Parent 5, School 1]

Another parent, a mother had this to say:

My only concern has to do with my mother looking after the children when I'm away for some months to trade in major markets in the country to enable me provide for the family sustenance [Parent 1, School 2]

The above quotes suggest that parents migrate mainly in pursuit of trading or income-generating activities for the benefit of all members of the extended family. Thus, as and when necessary, grandparents standing in assist in the care of their grand children is all part of the daily struggle for the survival of all in the extended family

#### **4.2 Teachers' Perspectives on Migration**

In this section, I cover teachers' perspectives on migration. Interviews with head teachers confirmed that the practice of parents migrating to do fishing or attend market centres elsewhere leaving grandparents to cater for children was very common in the study communities. One head teacher noted:

In this community, seasonal migration is very high. When parents are away, grandparents are frequently requested to attend PTA meetings and other school events. When you ask children, they tell you their parents were out of town doing business or job [Teacher Interview, School 2].

In emphasising the severity of seasonal migration in the community, another head teacher remarked that:

Most of these grandparents who attend PTA or other school events are invalids, illiterate and often found dozing at meetings. Sometimes, we become frustrated when grandparents provide answers or contributions ordinarily not expected of a parent. But we understand the situation; they are standing in for their children. Otherwise, their grand-children would suffer the consequences [Teacher Interview, School 1]

The above quote seems to imply that parents are obliged to attend PTA or other school events. The evidence suggests that so long as a pupil is represented, the child is absolved from sanctions. In the rural contexts such as this one, once a parent attends PTA or other school events, the child is free from sanctions. However, once in a while, teachers became frustrated when grandparents were unable to provide answers or some other contributions ordinarily expected from a parent. Notwithstanding the above challenges, one educated grandfather was praised for his involvement in PTA and school events. As one teacher puts *it*:

There is one grandparent who is fairly regular at PTA and other school events. Occasionally, he visits the school to find out how the grandson is performing. He also contributes meaningfully at meetings. I have no doubt that he went high up the educational ladder before retiring from active work.

I really admire him [Teacher Interview, School 2]

This quote shows appreciation of the involvement of those who are more educated. It is clear that in rural contexts such as this one grandparent, but grandmothers in particular, play a vital role in children's education but the 'quality' of parental representation or involvement in school is dependent on the capacity of the person attending the meeting, whether parent or grandparent.

#### **4.3 Preference for Boy-child Education**

As indicated in the literature review, in most deprived communities in Africa, decades-old customary practices are such that parents prefer boys' education to that of girls'. Consequently, whenever family resources do not permit educating both children then boys are enrolled at the expense of their sisters (Shabaya and Konadu-Agyemang, 2004; Obeng, 2002). The data collected for this study highlights some of the issues raised about competency might be explained by this practice which limits grandmothers' capacity to be fully involved in the

child's education. Parental preference for boys over girls was encountered on several instances in the current study. For example, one parent, a father, recounted:

Until recently, I had three children, two girls and a boy in a school. Owing to limited resources, I asked the two girls to stop schooling and work to be able to raise money to continue the education of the boy. At the moment, one girl sells foodstuffs at the market while the other sells firewood. If all three had remained in school, things would have been very difficult for all of us [Parent 3, School 2]

Another parent, a father commented:

The girls would be married off, hopefully to men who had already made it in life, hence there was no need to worry about classroom education for them. I know a number of girls in our community who have had their education disrupted because of early marriage and some in the course of their schooling as result of pregnancy. In the light of this, I have decided to channel all my resources into ensuring that my only boy completes school and become a big man in society. After all, how many women occupy top positions in our society? [Parent 11, School 1].

The inevitable conclusion is that parental choices are circumscribed by available resources and this has wider implications, namely that as the girl child is considered less important, they grow up into mothers who are less equipped to be actively involved in school activities. Another parent in support of the above had this to say:

Our girls are the luckiest school children as their financial burden will be borne by their husbands in future. We expect the boys to work hard in their education to be able to raise monies to support us in future [Parent 6, School 2)]

The above quotes indicate that parental involvement depends on which child will most likely look after a parent. The quotes suggest parents' belief that an educated son will be able to provide for his family, but an educated daughter will become a mother, and wife anyway, regardless of her schooling. It also suggests that the boy needs classroom education in order to get a good job to support his future wife. Such sentiment is certainly not new, what is worrying is the persistence of such practices in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Invariably, men grow up having a sense of entitlement and superiority, while women may lack self-esteem or believe that they cannot accomplish much. This kind of cultural mind-set might also influence parental decisions to enrol a child in school.

An interview with a class teacher about her views on girls' performance as compared to boys showed that teachers generally did not perceive any differences between the abilities of the sexes. However, the head teacher attributed the preference for boys' education to inherent cultural biases:

Though I do not perceive any differences between boys and girls in terms of academic performance in general, in this rural community, the belief is that girls' education no matter the level ends her in the kitchen [Teacher Interview, School 2].

This finding corroborates that of Yeboah (1997) that cultural bias and the perception of which child will most likely look after parent were critical variables in family decisions around girls' education. However, there were some progressive parents who were advocating for an equal treatment for both boys and girls. One parent, a father, had this to say:

Parents should invest in the education of both sexes since they could pool resources upon successful education to look after parents in their old age [Parent 3, School 2].

In all, it appears that parental involvement in children's education, indeed, the decision as to whether to send the child to school or not and to withdraw the child or not when the going gets tough, is often determined by cultural norms. Disadvantaged in society, girls' education can be sacrificed while family resources are invested in the boy-child's education. Eventually, parental fears are fulfilled as the girl-child is impregnated and is sent to the city to work as a house-help –and to begin an unending, abiding cycle as one parent commented:

In this community, most girls have dropped out of school due to teenage pregnancy. Most of them drop-out and end up selling fish, foodstuffs or some other ware. A large percentage of them move on into the city where the lucky ones find job as house help while the rest have to contend with life in the streets [Parent 9, School 1].

It seems archaic traditions and long-held societal misconceptions about girl-child education in rural Ghana turn self-fulfilling prophecy as the girl-child, eventually, drops out of school as a result of pregnancy, marriage, poverty or a combination of any of these. The extent of parental involvement in basic education in rural Ghana, is thus, informed by the biological sex of the child. This persistent practice of preference for boy child education

ultimately limits the capacity of grandmothers to be fully involved in the education of their grandchildren.

The findings from this study suggest contextualised nature of parental involvement and interconnectedness between family, school and community in rural communities suggesting that the term parental involvement needs to be broadly defined in policy to include contributions of the extended family and community networks.

## 5 Conclusion and Recommendations

The study has also highlighted the importance of linking parental involvement in rural and resource constrained communities to school governance. A major issue in Ghana is the decentralisation agenda and the extent to which this takes account of the specific challenges in rural contexts. The study has shown how factors operating outside formal governance bodies assume an important role for formal fora. In focusing on policy outcomes without recognising the importance of other factors such as the role of the extended family and more informal fora, the Central government or Ministry of Education in Ghana appears to have focused on the mechanisms for forging how schools and communities should work together, assuming this leads to increased parental involvement in schools. The study like others has illustrated how poverty compels children to work alongside their schooling sometimes at the request of mothers to support family sustenance and that parents are unlikely to be able to facilitate children's schooling in the face of economic challenges. This study has extended literature by showing that parents face similar resource constraints and lack of requisite support within formal governance structures. Pryor (2005, p.196) points out that Ghana's Ministry of Education's shallow understanding of the dynamics of rural living has led to pseudo-participation by parents, and suggests that without a more sophisticated grasp of rural and community life and work, the realisation of decentralisation policies may remain elusive for many years to come. In the light of this, it is suggested that policies about education decentralisation must be adapted to reflect contextual differences.

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