

# The Impact of Child Labour on Early Childhood Development and Learning: A Case of Gweru District

Phylis Mawere<sup>1</sup>, Dr Mercy Kurebwa<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Lecture Reformed Church University Zimbabwe

<sup>2</sup>Senior Lecturer, Zimbabwe Open University Zimbabwe

**Abstract:** *This study examined manifestations and patterns of child labour as it relates to ECD children's learning and development. A qualitative research approach was used in this research. Participants of this research were selected through purposive sampling. Interviews and document analysis were used to collect data. Participants included parents and children from Gweru urban and peri-urban schools, farms, mining areas and sub-urban residential areas. Data from transcribed interviews and documents was thematically analysed in line with the qualitative research approaches. The study revealed that Early Childhood children participated in working activities ranging from weeding, gold panning, caring for the sick, vending and begging in streets. The study concluded that parents violate children's rights through child labour, which deprives children from developing and learning effectively. To curb child labour and protect the rights of children, the study recommends enforcement of policies, budgeting for free primary education by the Government to allow working children access ECD and refrain from working activities, and holding awareness campaigns on children's rights.*

**Keywords:** Child, Early Childhood Development (ECD), exploitation, child work, child labour and poverty

## 1. Background of the Study

Child labour is a pervasive social problem throughout the world, especially in developing countries. Child labour is broadly defined as any form of economic activity done for at least on 1 hour per week and/or domestic chores for at least 7 hours per week and/or school labour for at least 5 hours per week, (Devi and Roy; 2008). Economic activity covers all market production whether paid or unpaid (Saswati Das; 2012). Work of a domestic nature (household chores) performed by children in their own households is noneconomic activity. Child labour could entail any form of economic activity and domestic chores done for at least 7 hours per day. Thus, child labour is defined not by the activity per se, but by the effect such activity has on the child. Some scholars argue that the difference between child work and child labour tends to be blurred. Child labour is rather destructive to the children involved because the work done is detrimental to their growth and learning (Gukurume and Nyanga; 2010). If child work has a negative effect most scholars call it child labour. In view of that the researcher used child labour and child work interchangeably. In this study child labour is defined as the premature involvement of children in adult forms of labour, working for long hours with this work interrupting with their educational endeavours. These children are thus deprived of meaningful educational opportunities and play activities.

Child labour is a serious child rights violation with lifelong negative consequences for children's physical, mental and social development (Brasilia; 2013). Zimbabwe as well as many other developing nations is guided by the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in protecting the children from abuse. Zimbabwe has ratified the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) 9 and the ILO convention No. 138 on

Minimum Age of 1973. A new Labour Relations Regulation under the Labour Relations Act which was introduced in February 1997 bans all employment of children under the age of 12. Also the Children's Protection and Adoption Act of 1972 provides conditions for protecting children's education in the event of child labour. It is intended to make provision for the protection, welfare and supervision of children ( Zimbabwe ,2005).This Act also prohibits certain types of street trading and vending by children under the age of 16 (Musandirire, 2013). The Act used to make it an offence for a person to employ a child if this resulted in the child being absent from school in terms of the Education Act, which at the time only applied to white children.

Although these instruments defend children's rights, practice on child labour as evidenced by findings from several studies, show that children are denied their rights. Studies that have been carried out reveal that in Zimbabwe child labour is widespread (Musundire, 2013, Kaliyati, 2002). Kaliyati et al (2002) found out that 83.9 per cent of 230 children were working and that these were between ages 8 and 18 years. It is widely agreed that the main forces driving child labour are poverty and lack of education (Basu et al., 2009; Ravallion and Wodon, 2000). Evidence from the study findings by Gukurume ( 2010) pointed to the fact that working, for these children, is a manifestation of a coping strategy employed by children muddled in abject poverty.

Findings from Kaliyati (2002), Musandirire (2013) indicate that children aged 7 to 18 years engage in child labour. This study took a departure in that it focused on Early Childhood Development children in particular (ECD children from 5 to 8 years). Secondly, little if any study has been done concerning child work for early childhood children, rather there is voluminous literature on child labour in general. It is paradoxical that while there has been a plethora of literature

pertaining to child labour as a whole, certainly not enough has been reported on the experiences of ECD children who are working and schooling simultaneously, the challenges they face, their perceptions on their work, benefits that come from such work if any and the strategies they employ to transcend the challenges confronting them in their daily routines. The study seeks to find out the nature of the activities these young children do and the challenges they face in combining work and school.

## 2. Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were to find out:

- Ways in which children are engaged in child labour.
- Perceptions of stake holders on engaging children in child labour.
- The impact of child labour on school attendance

## 3. Research Questions

- How are children engaged in child labour.?
- What are stake holders' perceptions on engaging children in child labour?
- What is the impact of child labour on school attendance?

## 4. Methodology

The study utilised qualitative research approach. Qualitative research provides rich and deep data and describes phenomena in words (Kazdin, 2000). The qualitative approach uses smaller samples, seeing each individual as a unique being. This research was more interested in the depth of the data rather than breadth and required the researcher to play an active role in the data collection. Qualitative research relates mainly to interviews done on a small scale (Oatey, 1999). In this study interviews were carried out with parents, teachers and children until data saturation.

A purposive sample was chosen with the assistance of school's administration and class teachers. Participants included ECD educators (ECD 'B', Grade 1, 2 and 3 teachers), parents and children from Gweru urban and peri-urban schools, farms, mining areas and residential areas where children come from. The sample comprised 24 ECD teachers, 36 ECD children who were engaged in child labour and their 36 parents and or guardians. All these participants were sampled from 6 urban and peri-urban schools.

Interviews and document analysis were used to collect data. Semi-structured interviews were used as they had freedom to vary the course of the interview based on the participant's responses (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). Mhlanga and Ncube (2002) view an interview as an oral questionnaire or a process of directly interacting with a subject with the purpose of extracting research data. Data concerning incidences of child labour, reasons for working, and awareness of children's rights was obtained through interviewing children and their caregivers. Interviews were necessary as they allowed the researcher to probe participants for unclear responses.

Document analysis is a form of qualitative research in which documents are interrogated by the researcher to give voice and meaning around an assessment topic (Administration methods, 2010). Public personal records that include registers were analysed using document analysis schedules. In this study attendance registers supplemented data obtained from interviews in order to triangulate the data. Cohen and Manion (1984) view triangulation as the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour. This study therefore emphasized triangulation of methods and sources so as to make data more valuable. Triangulation permitted verification and validation of qualitative data. Data collection and analysis was done concurrently. Each time the researcher collected data, at the end of the day she had to analyse and make some interpretations. Themes emerged from the data.

## 5. Findings

Findings of the study are presented, discussed and interpreted under the following subheadings; incidence of child labour, determinants of child labour, perceptions of stake holders on engaging ECD children in child labour, impact of child labour on school attendance and policies on child labour. The results of the above issues are presented as thick description of what was observed and interviewed from parents, home caregivers and children.

### 5.1 Incidence of Child Labour

The study investigated child labour in conjunction with schooling status of children. The study results revealed that child labour in Gweru urban and peri urban schools was significant. Many children were involved in a variety of tasks. The activities ranged from weeding, fishing, gold panning, looking after the sick, begging and vending activities. Interviewed teachers revealed that some pupils did not come to school because they engaged in child labour. One interviewed Grade two teacher at a peri urban school said that, "Children are left caring for the sick parents, engaged in gold panning, selling *doro* (beer) in sheebens and vegetables. She explained that young children from 6-7 year fetch water for those who are panning. These were paid \$1USD for a day.

In this study it was reported that such children would arrive at school around ten o'clock in the morning or never at all. Arriving around ten o'clock means they would have missed a lot of morning sessions. This is contrary to (Nkamleu, 2009) who suggest that childhood is probably the best time for acquiring knowledge from the formal education system if we consider schooling as an investment in human capital that yields a return in the labour market. The teachers mentioned that such children's performance was adversely affected.

The study also revealed that most children in peri urban schools were engaged in weeding activities in nearby farms or low residential areas. Children as young as 6-8 years confirmed that they accompanied their parents or guardians to assist in weeding. When interviewed the children reported that they weed from 3-4 long lines in which they are given USD 1\$ per line. Others instead of weeding they would have the responsibility of caring for the younger siblings whilst

the elders would be weeding. One of the researchers at the time of study witnessed one parent who came to her homestead with an eight year old who cared for her four month old little sister whilst the mother weeded the whole day. When the mother was asked why she brought the eight year old to care for the baby, she said that no one could care for the baby whilst she was working money was needed for her child's school fees. The situation was compounded by the fact that the child had been expelled from school for failure to pay the required fees. The mother reported that her child would only go to school when they had money enough.

Besides weeding activities children from 7-8 years old (boys) were engaged in fishing. They would go for fishing with elders after school. The fish would then be sold. Most 5-9 year old boys also herd cattle. Teachers interviewed reported that boys who herd cattle left the school at break time to relieve parents or guardians. The children confirmed that they had to leave early or else they would face punishment at home. The children had to obey their parents.

Findings of the study showed that some children were given several responsibilities which include caring for sick and assisting blind parents to beg for money. Some teachers in peri-urban schools reported that girls were absent from school caring for the sick. Musandirire (2013) in his research also found children who were caring for the sick. He postulates that the health of these children is sometimes endangered. One lady teacher at a peri-urban school said that one six year old child had a responsibility of assisting his blind parents to beg for money. She confirmed that she had seen the child most of the times begging money in town. When interviewed the boy said that he sang and bit drums as a way of begging. The teacher explained that the child would spend some days without attending school and that he never had time to do home work.

The study also revealed that in both peri-urban and urban residential areas children from 6-8 years participated in vending activities. Vending activities ranged from selling vegetables, sweets potatoes chips, juice cards and beer. It was observed that some children participated in the activities after school, during the weekends or during the days when others were at school. One lady grade two teacher said, "I often see a lot of children from my class and school selling the juice cards after school." One of the children proudly said "If you come at Meikles you will see me selling the juice cards." When asked whether it was good to sell various things, boy said, "Yes its good because *unowana mari* (you will get money)". These findings concur with Musandirire's (2013) findings who noted that children usually expressed pride in the contribution they make to their families.

In peri-urban schools, teachers interviewed complained that children as young as 7-9 years selling beer in sheer beans. One grade three teacher commented that "By observing what happens in sheer beans most of these children always end up as drop outs." Such children would have joined the world of work at an early age.

When asked whether they liked working whilst others were at school most children said, they enjoyed it because of the benefits they were getting in terms of food and money. They

also said that they would be beaten by their parents or guardians if they refuse to help them. Their parents were the ones who made decisions. However when asked if given a choice the majority preferred not to work as it interfered with their schoolwork. Only 25% of interviewed children preferred to work as they felt that they would earn some money and assist their parents.

Most of the working children got income from vending, farm work, gold panning, and fishing earning from US \$1 to US\$4 a day. Most of the children who received cash payments for their work said parents or guardians made the decision for them on how to spend the money. The majority just gave it all to their parents or guardians. Although payment was in money, some children interviewed received food, clothing, and payment of school fees, uniforms or stationery. It was observed that, the income from the trade activities contributed to the livelihood of the child, and sometimes to the livelihood of the whole family. In most cases, the work provided money for school fees and books.

## 5.2 Determinants of Child Labour

The research found that there were various causes of child labour. The interviewed children, teachers and parents revealed that poverty was a major driving force for many children to be engaged in working activities. Teachers in both urban and peri-urban schools indicated that the rate of absenteeism was necessitated by lack of payment of school fees and food. Parents and children interviewed said that they worked so that they could pay for their school fees, school equipment, and uniforms or supplement income for other basic resources. Saswati Das (2012) observed in developing countries, it is widely believed that poverty plays as a determining force for many children to work full time for their own and their families' survival.

It became apparent that poverty in this study was necessitated by various situations. Firstly, most household living in the peri-urban earned their living by working in farms and farm labourers are the lowest paid. Most child labourers are from very poor families. The death of parents from HIV/AIDS is leaving the orphaned children to stay with guardians without any sources of income led children to engage in work related activities. 75% of children interviewed indicated that they were staying with grandparents. It was also observed that reconstituted or single parent families contributed to child labour. Such cases were very common among the working children interviewed. In reconstituted families the fathers were said not to care about the children's welfare. Single mothers on the other hand were unemployed hence they had to resort to work in fields and engage in vending activities together with their children.

It was evident from the study that some guardians or parents with children who performed working activities did not value education. Most of these had very low levels of education. Young mothers' levels of education varied from primary to 'O' level whilst older parents or guardians were not educated at all. Interviewed teachers confirmed that parents or guardians did not value education leading them to make such decisions of leaving children caring for siblings,

herding cattle and carrying out vending activities whilst their counterparts are at school.

### 5.3 Impact of Child Labour on School Attendance

Findings of the study indicated that quite a number of children fail to attend school. Documents analysed revealed that children in peri-urban schools absent themselves more often than those in urban schools. Registers observed showed that grade 1 to 3 children in urban settings were absent at the rate of 2 to 5 per day in a class. On the other hand 5 to 16 children per day in peri-urban settings were absent in a class. This was alarming. One teacher actually said "Absenteeism is a trend at this school."

Teachers also cited several reasons which included lack of food, sickness, travelling long distances, herding cattle, parental attitudes towards school, failure to pay fees, caring for younger siblings and sick parents /guardians in the absence of parents. This showed that children were engaged in various responsibilities at the expense of going to school. In addition due to lack of fees and food children were forced to engage in activities such as vending, fishing, gold panning and weeding to source for income. The study therefore found out that children who worked were frequently absent from school. In addition school attendance was affected when children had to assume caring roles for sick parents. It was also observed that in some cases teachers themselves would ask schoolchildren to weed portions of their fields during school hours in order to give the children stationery.

The research found that to a great extent child labour adversely affects children's development and learning. By not attending school, children would miss out several lessons and fail to grasp certain concepts impacting negatively on performance. One teacher noted with concern that one child who was very intelligent was always absent for at least two days a week. The child would avail himself continuously only when writing tests. Missing school would result in missing lessons and failing to grasp certain concepts. The child would therefore not perform to the best of his/her ability. Other children in peri-urban schools either came to school late after carrying out some tasks ( around ten o'clock in the morning) or left school early ( around break time) to do certain tasks. These children missed a lot of morning and afternoon sessions compromising on their learning progress. The study found out that most working children in urban areas attended school but carried out vending activities and other responsibilities after school and during the weekend. It was also noted that carrying out the activities for the rest of the weekend and afternoons after school compromised on their time to do home work affecting performance ultimately.

### 5.4 Stake holders' Perceptions on Engaging ECD Children in Child Labour

Parents and guardians of children who engage in working activities were interviewed to find out their views on child labour. The study revealed that, there were mixed feelings concerning the issue. Most of these elders felt that they were obliged to have children work in order to get money or supplement income. For example one woman who came to one of the researcher's homestead with an eight year old child

who had to baby sit whilst she did piece work expressed the same sentiments. She said "I need her school fees and I have no one to care for the baby whilst I do the activities." When asked whether she knew anything concerning children's rights, she simply said " *Ndinoziva kuti kumushungurudza asi handina zvandingaite because ndinofanira kuwana mari yacho.*" (I know that I am abusing her but have no choice but to let her assist me to get the money for fees). However from the research findings most parents were not aware of children's rights. The elders seemed to be bound by cultural practices in which children have to be inducted into the world of work or learn basic survival skills in preparation for the future. One mother who was at the market with her child selling vegetables said, " *Mwana haafaniri kungodzidza kugara.*" (A child should not sit only without doing any work.) She proudly said "Tafadzwa can now sell all vegetables here without any problem because she started when she was in grade one, now I can leave her alone. Most of the times I find her with a lot of money." From the research findings most parents were not aware of children's rights.

Urban parents showed that they valued school work because they said that their children would participate in the activities after school and during the weekend. However they seemed to think that learning just goes on within the four walls only and not considering home work and play activities Early Childhood children need to do. The study further revealed that teachers had mixed feelings towards child labour. Teachers with children engaged in working activities felt that they were being deprived of their time to do school work resulting in poor performance and that they were being introduced into the world of work prematurely. Furthermore they felt that parents and guardians were not valuing children's education. The teachers actually noted that it could have been better if these children could go and do piece work in farms in order to earn a living. When interviewed some teachers showed that they were not aware of the rights of children to be protected against child labour.

## 6. Discussion

This study sought to determine the incidences the factors leading to child labour, and impact on early childhood children's learning. It established that ECD children are engaged in various tasks including, weeding, fishing, begging, gold panning caring for siblings and the sick and vending activities. The activities tended to be more as compared to those found out by Kaliyati et al (2002) and Musandirire (2013) which included vending, domestic work, working on farms and child prostitution.

The tasks done by these children were expected to be done by adults which means that children were prematurely initiated into adult activities. This was seen as part of our African culture to initiate children into the world of working early. Shumba (2013) concurred with this view and said that this is considered to be initiating children into the African culture so that they can become self-reliant and self-sufficient when they grow up. It also became apparent from the study that parents or guardians felt that children needed to be initiated into the world of work at an early age

According to Zimbabwean culture, children under 18 years of age are under their parents' custody and hence have limited rights (Musandirire; 2009). Parents have the right to ask their children to do certain domestic chores at home such as cooking, fetching water, herding cattle and weeding in communal farms. Findings from the study show that children, because of their culture they were required to obey their parents or guardians. Almost all interviewed children said they went to work because either their parents or guardians told them to do so. If they fail to obey they would face punishment. This only suggested parents' ignorance of children's rights to be protected from exploitation by parents/guardians.

Data from registers and teachers indicated that children absent from school frequently. Most of these would be engaged in these activities for long hours. Therefore such activities interfered with their school work confirming Musandirire's (2013) observations. Nkanleu (2000) suggest that childhood is probably the best time for acquiring knowledge from formal education yet children in this study are deprived of this prime time. This therefore means that the children's education isn't being protected as it should be in relation to the Children's Protection and Adoption Act. The Act used to make it an offence for a person to employ a child if this resulted in the child being absent from school in terms of the Education Act, which at the time only applied to white children (Musandirire, 2013). For children to enjoy their right the present the act needs to follow suit. Some of the activities such as caring for the sick are detrimental to children's health. These observations were also made by Musandirire's (2013).

It emerged from the study that poverty is the main determinant of child labour. Most of the parents or guardians of working children were either unemployed or employed in farms where they earn very little. These findings seem to dovetail with Gukurume and Nyanga (2010) who found out that children in poor families are vulnerable and victims of their parents' poverty and economic insecurity. The new Labour Relations Regulation under the Labour Relations Act which was introduced in February 1997 bans all employment of children under the age of 12. Despite this act, the study has shown that 6 to 8 year old children work in farms and are paid at the rate of \$1 to \$4 a day. The fact that these children were employed could be an indication of lack of enforcement of the act. Devi and Roy (2008) also found out that, educational level of the mother, crowding in the family, families being in debt, presence of a handicapped or alcoholic member in the family, gender and religion were significantly associated with the working child. Findings from the study indicated that most guardians or parents with children who performed working activities had very low levels of education. It emerged that they did not value education and as such forcing children to engage in working activities. These views would be similar to Nkanleu's (2009) who said that parents who are educated understand the importance of schooling from personal experience. Major findings of this study therefore established the linkage of parental education with child schooling and child work decisions in the family for children.

Overallly the results of the study indicated that 6-8 year old children from poverty stricken families were exploited as they were engaged in activities that compromise their school work. It was therefore evident that laws were not protecting children's right to education and from child labour activities. The findings seem to take a departure from Musandirire (2013) who view that children need to be in schools not working. He espouses that they need to play and develop without being exploited. As such childhood is probably the best time for acquiring knowledge from the formal education system if one considers schooling as an investment in human capital that yields a return in the labour market. In that sense, it is natural to see schooling as the preferred alternative to child labour (Grootaert, 1998). Just as Musandirire (2013) observed in his study, the research discovered that there is a close relationship between child labour and education. From the findings education can "produce" child labour whilst the high cost of education which has escalated to alarming levels forced many children and their parents / guardians to work on farms to raise school fees.

It has been evident from the study that by having most ECD children in Gweru District being engaged in all forms of child labour, children's rights to be protected against exploitation are infringed. The study observed that demands of the International Labour relations act are being violated as stated by Musandirire (2013) that the Act prohibits certain types of street trading and vending by children under the age of 16. By engaging children in vending activities such as selling vegetables, juice cards, hot staff (beer), sweets and chips, there is continued violation of the demands of the act.

It became apparent from the study that the cost of education has mostly affected poor households forcing many children to engage in child working activities in order to pay fees. (Musandirire, 2013) noted that the Education Act makes provision for compulsory education. This implies that ECD children should always attend school. However education in Zimbabwe is not free there by affecting children from the poor families. The education act in this case does not cater for the poor families. The fact that education was not free exacerbated the children's vulnerability.

## 7. Conclusion

It is crystal clear from the discussion that Early Childhood children were defenseless, helpless and obedient as they were prematurely involved in adult forms of labour activities that interfere with school work at the detriment of their learning and development. Yet childhood is the best time for acquiring knowledge through formal education of which these defenseless and helpless children are being deprived of during this prime stage. It therefore calls for concerted effort from the researchers, educators, parents/ guardians, government, policy makers and implementers to defend children, so that their rights to education and to be protected against child labour may be realised.

## 8. Recommendations

The study makes the following recommendations which have implications for policy, practice and research. There should be:

- Awareness campaigns on the rights of the child in order to protect children from all forms of abuse including child labour.
- There is need for free ECD tuition in order to minimise all forms of child labour.
- Monitoring of children's attendance with a view to checking on whether absentees are engaging in child labour.
- Employment generation schemes for poor families in order to reduce poverty thereby improving on household prosperity.

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