



Street children and learning difficulties

Research on the role of learning problems in children in the streets



Special Attention Project 2011

Foreword

This research was made possible through funding from Disability Rights Fund (USA). We are grateful for their support. We also like to thank the research assistants who carried out the data collection for their commitment and seriousness.

Summary

This research consists of information about twenty-three (23) children who are living in the streets of Accra and who show symptoms of Specific Learning Disabilities. Data was collected from their families and their former schools. Indications are that most children already were coping with learning difficulties when they were still in school, often combined with behavioural problems. The pattern is that children first dropped out of school and spend another two years at home before resorting to the streets. Majority of children are from 'broken homes' or otherwise dysfunctional families. The combination of academic problems and family problems put children at high risk of ending up in the streets.

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Part 1 About the research

1.1. Introduction

The streets of Accra and other major cities in Ghana are full with children who have made the streets their residence. Common perception is that all these children are from the North of the country, and are there for economic reasons. Deviant behaviour is often attributed to the circumstances in the streets and the lack of parental control.

Special Attention Project (SAP) has for the past three (3) years operated an educational centre for street children who are identified as having learning difficulties. The learning problems often come with behavioural patterns that are problematic in an organised classroom environment.

Earlier research (SAP 2007) established that quite a number of children who live independently in the streets have severe difficulties in learning to read and write, and to a lesser extend in mathematics. This makes re-integration in mainstream education extremely difficult, while apprenticeship training requires a level of maturity and stability as well as the legal age of 15.

Nearly all children who attend SAP were born in the South of Ghana, many within Accra. This is a fundamentally different 'type' of child from the teenager who migrates from the North in search of work. This research seeks to share more background data on children who have come to the streets for reasons other than poverty only.

1.2. Aim of the research

The aim of this research programme was to find out more about the role of learning difficulties in the process of school drop-out and subsequent resort to the streets by children below fifteen (15) years of age.

Specific research questions were:

- How do learning difficulties compare to other factors like poverty, physical health problems and dysfunctional families for children who have come to live in the streets?
- What are other contributing circumstances that cause a child to stop basic schooling and come to live in the streets?
- What do family members observe in terms of developmental problems in a child who has difficulty in academic learning?
- What do teachers observe in a child who is unable to follow the mainstream curriculum?

1.3. Methodology

The research used two sources of information: the family of the child and the last school the child attended before dropping out. The children who were part of the research all live independently in the streets and attend or attended the educational centre of SAP at Kaneshie Market. All are identified as having learning difficulties and would need additional support if they would return to a mainstream classroom.

Three questionnaires were designed for semi-structured interviews. The first questionnaire focused on the individual history of the child, in terms of care situation and social environment. The second focused on the family's observations concerning the development of the child, when the child was still living at home. The third focused on the teacher's observations concerning the academic performance of the child before the child dropped out from school.

Four (4) research assistants were contracted and trained to conduct the interviews with the teachers. The social worker of SAP conducted most of the interviews with the families / parents during home visits, while some parents were interviewed when they visited the centre of SAP to see their child.

The children accompanied the researchers as much as possible, to help locate their families and schools and to encourage re-integration. A few children refused to go, while others could not be found when their trip was due. This reduced the number of children who were part of the research from thirty (30) to twenty-three (23). Only in ten (10) schools could the child be remembered by either the Headmaster or the class teacher. Other schools could not be found or there was nobody who could share any information concerning the child.

Part 2 Outcomes

2.1 Overview of sample

General information:

	Boys	Girls	Total
No. of children part of research	20	3	23
Average age	14.3	11.3	13.7
Highest age	17	17	17
Lowest age	8	8	8
Average age of coming to the streets			11.6

In the research sample, boys outnumber girls considerably. The reason is that girls who live in the streets are in general much more difficult to involve in support programmes like SAP than boys. In this sample, two out of the three girls were not (yet) living in the streets, but were with a relative who was trading at Kaneshie Market, were out-of-school and at high risk of eventually spending all their time in the streets.

For this reason, in further analysis the sample is taken in total, as the statistics about the girls are not very representative.

The children are between ages 8 and 17, and the average age of coming to live in the streets is 11.6 years. This indicates that children younger than 10 years already live in the streets on their own, without regular adult support.

Care situation of children before coming to the streets:

Number of years that father was present in daily life (average)	6.9
Number of years mother was present in daily life (average)	4.6
No. of divorced parents (out of 23)	16
Age of child when parents divorced (average)	5.75
No. of different care givers in years that child was at home (average)	2.21
Years at home divided by no. of care givers	5.9

No. of different abodes before coming to the streets (average)	2.3
No of orphans (out of 23)	0
No of children who lost one parent (out of 23)	5
First born in family (out of 23)	9

Surprisingly, for most children the father has been longer present in their daily lives than their mother. Earlier research by SAP (2007) showed opposite figures. An explanation can be that in the 2007 survey the sample consisted of equal numbers of boys and girls, whereby the boys in general stayed longer with their fathers, while the girls spent more years with their mothers.

Given the fact that children came to the streets before they were 12 years old, they only enjoyed the presence of their biological parents for about half the years they spent at home. The rest of the time they were taken care of by other relatives.

Majority of children are from broken homes, and their parents divorced when they were still very young. Averagely, they had more than 2 different care givers during the years they stayed at home. This means that about every 5.9 years they had someone else who took care of their daily needs. This indicates quite a high level of instability in their early lives, which also reflects in the fact that they averagely stayed in more than 2 different places before they came to the streets.

No orphans were among the research group, but 5 out of 23 children had lost one biological parent. A relatively high number of children are first born in their families (9 out of 23).

Economic situation:

Children from homes with irregular income	8
Children from homes with regular income	15

Majority of children came from homes where there was a regular source of income. In those cases, the family was able to provide the basic needs of the child, and there were no direct economic reasons for the child to be in the streets.

Health:

Children with poor health	0
Children with sight problems	0
Children with hearing problems	0

No children were reported to have any health problems that could have caused them to stop school and leave home. There were also zero incidences of problems with hearing or sight.

School drop-out and after:

Age drop out from school (average)	9.5
Years between school and streets (average)	2.1
Years spent in streets (average)	2.26

Children averagely dropped out of school before they were 10 years old. After that, they still stayed in the house for about 2 years before they came to live in the streets. This indicates that a problem at school preceded another problem at home that drove them to the streets.

Children had averagely spent more than 2 years in the streets at the time of the research.

Last place of abode before coming to the streets:

Children with last home in Accra	10
Children with last home in GAR	2
Children with last home outside GAR	11

Nearly half the children who were part of the research had their last place of abode within Accra, and had relatives in the city. Two children came from other parts of the Greater Accra Region, while the remaining eleven (11) were from other regions: six (6) from Central Region, two (2) from Eastern Region, and one (1) each from Western, Brong Ahafo and Upper east Regions.

2.2. Observations of families about their children

For each child a relative was traced who took care of the child before they left home, and interviewed about the abilities of the child. Though the ages of the children vary, the outcomes give an indication of the general developmental level of the children. In another part of the research, similar questions were asked the teachers in their last school. Family members may not always observe well or may not be aware that a child at a certain age should have developed certain skills. And some problems may not manifest themselves in tasks given in the house, but rather become visible in a classroom setting.

No cross-comparisons were made (eg. Comparing children who were seen as 'very troublesome' to those who were seen as 'physically very active' and to measure the overlap) because of the small sample size.

The families were interviewed and the following observations came out:

Did the child know currency?	Yes: 21	No: 2
Did the child know the difference between left and right?	Yes: 21	No: 2

Most children seemed to have basic knowledge needed for daily living, like the currency and the difference between left and right.

Did the child often confuse 'yesterday' and 'tomorrow' in speech?	Yes: 6	No: 17
Could the child sequence events well?	Yes: 21	No: 2
Did the child usually make sense when (s)he talked?	Yes: 22	No: 1
Did the child behave socially appropriate?	Yes: 14	No: 9

Orientation in time seemed to be problematic for some of the children. This is a typical symptom in children who have learning problems, and who have difficulty 'thinking backward and forward'. Sequencing of events seemed not to be a major problem.

Nearly all children were observed as ‘talking sense’ most of the time. This indicates that the families do not see these children as ‘stupid’ but acknowledge that their intelligence is at least at an average level. Social behaviour however caused more problems, which is again a typical symptom in children who have difficulty in understanding social codes and in perceiving how other people feel or what is expected of them. This is often a source of embarrassment to parents and sometimes the cause of social stigmatising.

Was the child perceived as troublesome?	Very: 9	Yes: 4	No: 10
Could the child sit in one place?	Yes: 9	Sometimes: 4	No: 10
Could the child follow instructions?	Yes: 11	Sometimes: 7	No: 5
Could the child stay on a task?	Yes: 10	Sometimes: 9	No: 4
How physically active was the child?	Very active: 17	Active: 2	Quiet: 4

Majority of children were seen as ‘(very) troublesome’ by their families, and this is likely to be linked to the fact that majority also were seen as physically very active. Sitting in one place was a problem, and the ability to follow instructions and stay on a task was also low. These are issues that can cause a lot of problems in a home situation, and may result in repeated punishment of the child. All these observations are typical for children who are hyperactive. These patterns correspond with behaviour seen in the Centre of SAP.

Could the child organise him/herself well?	Yes: 18	No: 5	
Did the child do the right thing at the right time?	Yes: 7	Sometimes: 13	No: 3

Self-organisation seemed to be quite ok, but doing the right thing at the right time was more problematic. Again, this can create many problems in a home situation, as it also does in a support setting like the Centre of SAP.

Did the child have study time at home?	Yes: 9	No: 13	No info: 1
Did the family offer help with homework?	Yes: 8	No: 14	No info: 1
Were there any learning materials at home?	Yes: 7	No: 15	No info: 1

Conditions for learning were clearly not very conducive for many of the children at home: majority had no study time at home and received no help with their homework. House chores and playing were common activities after school, indicating that schooling was not a high priority. Most children did not have any additional learning materials available to them at home.

2.3 Information from teachers about the children

Only ten (10) teachers could be interviewed. In some cases it had been many years since the child attended the school but the teacher remembered the child well because of low performance and difficult behaviour in class.

Drop out level:

	KG	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	JHS
No. of children	2	2	9	3	2	4	0	0

There was a peak in drop out from Primary School class 2. This is the level at which a child is supposed to be able to read and write. This is in line with the literacy level of most children at SAP; many children are still illiterate and have severe reading problems.

Public / private school	Public: 10	Private: 0
Truancy	Yes: 7	No: 3
Theft	Yes: 1	No: 9

All children attended public schools. There were high incidences of truancy, while in one case the child was known to be stealing at the school premises.

Neatness	Quite neat: 7	Dirty/unkempt: 3	
Physical activity	Very active: 5	Quite active: 2	Quiet: 3
Troublesome	Yes: 3	No: 7	
Able to sit still	Yes: 2	Sometimes: 4	No: 4

Three out of ten children were remembered as children who were not neat, and majority was seen as quite active or very active.

Sitting still was again a problem for most children which correspond with the information from the families. Only three children were seen as ‘troublesome’.

Concentration	Full lesson: 0	Half lesson: 6	Less than that: 4
Ability to follow instructions	Good: 3	Average: 6	Poor: 1
To stay on task	Yes: 2	Sometimes: 5	No: 3
Finish assignments	Yes: 2	Sometimes: 4	No: 4
Right thing at right time	Yes: 1	Sometimes: 5	No: 4

The level of concentration was generally low: most children could only pay attention for half a lesson or less. This again is a typical problem in children who are hyperactive and a common problem at SAP. Staying on a task was equally problematic, as well as finishing assignments. Doing the right thing at the right time was seen again as a problem, similar to the observations from the families.

Does the child know difference between left and right?	Yes: 9	No: 1
Does the child generally make sense when (s)he talks?	Yes: 9	No: 1

Again, children seemed to have basic knowledge for daily life, and were seen as sensible individuals.

Could the child sequence events well?	Yes: 5	No: 5
Confuse ‘yesterday’ and ‘tomorrow’	Yes: 3	No: 7

Teachers observed more problems with sequencing of events than families did. It is possible that this problem manifests itself more in school than at home, or that teachers are better at noticing it. Again, the sample is too small to draw any definite conclusions. Three out of ten children had difficulty to differentiate between the past and the future and use the right words.

Did the child behave socially appropriate?	Yes: 1	Sometimes: 7	No: 2
Response to group work	Good: 1	Average: 7	Poor: 2

Social behaviour again was a problem, and the ability of doing assignments together with others was also not very good.

Academic performance:

Reading	Good: 0	Average: 3	Poor: 7
Writing	Good: 1	Average: 5	Poor: 4
Mathematics	Good: 1	Average: 4	Poor: 5
Spelling	Good: 0	Average: 3	Poor: 7
Letters/words	Good: 0	Average: 7	Poor: 3
Sounds	Good: 2	Average: 4	Poor: 4
Drawing	Good: 3	Average: 3	Poor: 4
Colouring	Good: 3	Average: 7	Poor: 0

From the above table it is clear that core subjects like reading, writing and mathematics were difficult for majority of the children. This is very much in line with their learning level at SAP: majority of children at the centre have reading problems, many have motor/coordination problems (writing) and mathematics beyond addition/subtraction is also problematic. It is clear that the children experienced these problems already when they were still in school, and it is likely that this contributed to their premature departure from the school system.

Teaching materials	Yes: 7	No: 3
Refresher course	Yes: 8	No: 2
Strategy for slow learners	Yes: 9	No: 1
PTA	Yes: 10	No: 0
SMC	Yes: 10	No: 0

In seven out of ten cases, the teacher had some learning materials available apart from blackboard and chalk. Majority of teachers also had gone for a refresher course within the past two years.

Most teachers had some strategy for 'slow learners'; only one teacher said he really did not know what to do and just left such children to themselves. Strategies varied from giving the child extra time after school to teaming them up with other pupils who could help them.

All schools had a Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and a School Management Committee (SMC), but in general they were seen as not very active.

Part 3 Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

- Children younger than ten years cater for themselves in the streets of Accra.
- There are surprisingly few orphans among street children; of all the children in the research group the nearest relatives could be found.
- Economic hardship is not the only factor that forces children to the streets; also children from homes that can provide for them are living in the streets.
- Many street children have experienced much instability in their early lives, concerning place of abode as well as care givers; few were brought up by both their biological parents.
- High levels of physical activity, inability to do the right thing at the right time and poor social skills were identified by families as problems they experienced with their children. They found their children difficult to handle. This corresponds with behavioural patterns seen in a support setting for street children, indicating that this is not caused by street life.
- Problems in school precede any problems at home which make the child resort to the streets.
- Primary class two seems to be the level at which children with academic problems are more likely to drop out from school.
- All children were identified as 'weak students', with poor performance in core subjects.
- Academic performance before coming to the streets showed patterns similar to performance seen in an educational programme for street children, indicating that learning problems were not caused by life in the streets.
- Learning conditions, especially those at home, were not very good for most children.
- Teacher attitudes towards students who did not perform well were generally positive and helpful.

Recommendations

- Family education is necessary to make parents see their responsibilities and to help them understand that difficult behaviour of children is not always intentional but can be related to learning difficulties.
- Teachers need training to identify learning disabilities and how to manage them; resources should be made available to offer extra support to children who find it difficult to keep up with the curriculum.
- Stakeholders in the problem of street children should broaden their scope and acknowledge that failure of the school system to retain 'slow learners' is a contributing factor.
- There is some urgency in tackling this problem, as children in the streets are at high risk of growing up disappointed with society for not caring for them. 'Pay back' in the form of armed robbery and other social vices is a likely consequence.