CULTURE VERSUS MODERNITY: FOSTERAGE AND EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY IN RURAL DAGBON, NORTHERN REGION OF GHANA

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ABSTRACT

Fosterage is a traditional cultural practice where children are given to relatives and friends to raise up. It was done to ensure that children were raised under strict conditions that will prepare them to face live in adulthood. This kind of strict training could not be offered by biological parents. It was also done to foster family and friendship ties. However, in most cases, fostered children are excessively used for domestic chores at the expense of their education. The paper therefore examines the effects of fostering on children’s educational attainment.

Key word: Fostering, adoption, fostered parent, biological parent, educational inequality

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, Ghana has made tremendous strides towards the achievement of universal basic education. Enrolment at the basic education level has been increased and there is almost gender parity in enrolment. The massive expansion of school infrastructure, the pro-poor policies such as the School Feeding Programme, the Capitation Grants, etc, contributed significantly to the increased in enrolment at the basic level. These are all geared towards Government efforts to achieving the universal basic education as enshrined in the 1992 Constitution of Ghana, the Millennium Development Goals and the Education for All policies.

Despite these impressive and elaborate policies intervention towards the achievement of universal basic education in Ghana, certain socio-cultural practices such as fosterage and adoption still derail government’s efforts and contribute to disparities in educational attainment.

This paper seeks to examine the fostering and adoption and how they contribute to inequality in educational attainment in Ghana. Specifically, the paper examines the effects of fosterage on the girls education, the nature and extent of child fosterage, factors that encourage fosterage, reasons for fosterage, fosterage and educational inequality and the relationship between biological parents and their fostered children.

2.0 Methodology and Approach

The approach was structured in a way that enabled the collection of high quality data from 10 sampled rural communities in Tamale metropolis, while ensuring timeliness and technical quality. The survey combined good community entry strategies and participatory rural appraisal (PRA) techniques. The techniques took into cognizance of the wider issues relating to focus or target groups (e.g., teachers, parents, fostered children, foster parents, etc).

Data were collected from both secondary and primary sources. The secondary data were obtained from published sources such as books, journal articles, news papers, magazines, reports, etc. This information was obtained from libraries, internet, Government Department and Agencies, from NGOs, archives, etc. The primary data were obtained from the field and were solicited directly from the study communities.

Snowball approach was also used to identify fostered children and in all the ten communities. For the foster parents, one or two were identified first and interviewed, and thereafter, they led the interviewer to more foster parents. At the school level, fostered children were identified in each class
and those from the age of seven years and above were selected and interviewed. In each community, 20 fostered children who were not attending school were also identified and interviewed. However, the number of fostered children in this category could not be predetermined before the field work and therefore varied from community to community.

To further strengthen the bonds between a woman’s natal family and that of her marital family, it is expected that “If a man gives his daughter to a man in marriage the husband may give back a child to his wife’s father so that the other children who stay with their father may know their mother’s side through their brother who has returned there” [13].

Macro-demographic factors are sometimes critical as well in influencing fosterage. Large differences in fertility and the incidence of childlessness also promote fosterage for both labor and companionship [7]. For those who see fosterage as an economic venture, they argue that, macro-level influences are important issues in fosterage because it is focused on micro-level decision-making, which emphasizes and motivates both sending and receiving households [4]. When fosterage is seen from this perspective, it can be construed as a bargain between sending and receiving households. For many poor families, out-fostering children hold the promise of a better life for their children. Even if these parents must forgo the immediate labor contributions of their children, they expect to benefit in the long run when their children gain a foothold in the urban labor force [7].

These expectations of economic mobility have implication for some urban families in Africa who face constant pressure to take in additional relatives, especially youth seeking education and employment. The motivations of host families can be semi-altruistic, if socialization puts a cultural premium on extended-family assistance [3]. Motivations may also be construed as a pay-back for the selective care received in youth [11; 15], a means to avoid ostracism, validate one's status, or access family labor [4;2].

While some families in Dagbon do send children to live with relatives (particularly in urban areas) for the purposes of better access to formal schooling, the literature does not suggest this to be a dominant reason for fosterage. However, Oppong argues that, fosterage for the purpose of access to schooling was notable in the early years of state education. This was due to the fact that long distances to school until relatively recent years, children most often boys, would often be fostered to relatives living in towns, especially the regional capital Tamale. While living in town, the boys would perform domestic chores in teachers’ or clerks’ households in return for a place to stay [13].

3. An overview of fostering
Tradition, religion and cultural influences have different impact, on men, women and children. They largely undermined the position of women in society and reinforced discriminatory cultural practices. Kinship and family relationship, among the Dagomba have entrenched fosterage and adoption of children as a traditional means of binding families’ together. Traditionally, large families are cherished, valued and people who belong to large families feel proud and deeply satisfied and secure. To this end, maintaining large family ties is very important.

For those who see fostering as a means of social security, they argue that the extended family system permits frequent exchanges of resources and children across nuclear family units in ways that are intended to reduce socioeconomic inequality. The notion that extended families provide a social safety net and buffer socioeconomic inequalities has gained credence in the literature on families and inequality in Africa, in studies focused on class conflict, welfare inequality across households [4;2], or schooling inequalities among children [12].

For the rural Dagomba, large families are considered as social capital, which are useful during weddings, naming ceremonies, installation of chiefs and funerals. Fosterage is used not only as a means of binding families and relationships together, but also as a means of socialization. According to Firth [8], “fostering and adoption are specific mechanisms which detach the child from its parents and attach it to the members of the wider kinship group”. It is not only Dagomba who practice it, but many other ethnic groups in northern Ghana, including the Gonja [9;10].

The Dagomba place high premium on the future of the child and therefore proper socialization of the child is great value. To ensure good socialization of the child, they believe that parents who naturally are sympathetic and kind towards their real children may not be good socialization agents. “Instead it may be the father’s sibling or mother’s father or brother or another relative who becomes in a sense the social parent of the child” [13].
3.2 The effects of fosterage on education
A study conducted by [5] on fosterage and educational access among the Dagomba in the Savelugu-Nanton district, reveals that in the Northern Region, a fostered child has 19% chance lower than a biological son or daughter in attending school, other things being equal. This effect is approximately twice as large as the effect of a child being male as opposed to female [5].

The study further indicates that although the prevalence of fosterage was higher for girls; the negative effect on attendance at school was higher for boys. On the effects of gender and fosterage, fostered boys and girls have almost equal initial access chances. The study added that fosterage is almost twice as prevalent (at 18.7% of all children) in the Savelugu-Nanton district compared to the Northern Region generally. It concluded that, the prevalence of fosterage was found to be higher for girls, at 22.6%, compared to 15.7% for boys and that fostered children are typically more over-age for their grade if they are boys, and more likely to drop-out of school if they are girls [5].

[5] indicates that, one of the biggest challenge faced by fostered girls in Dagbon is that girls are typically fostered by women and most often their husbands may not regard these girls as part of their responsibility in respect of meeting schooling costs

An important reason for lower levels of educational access among fostered children in Dagbon, as elsewhere, consists in the differences that may exist between the expectations of fostered and biological children in terms of work. The issue of work is well illustrated in historical context: sometimes parents wish to send their children to school but are prevented from doing so by the ‘family head’, a child’s foster parent or fear of displeasing the chief [14].

4.1 The State of Child Fosterage and how it affects Girls Education

Type of family of household respondents
The study considered the type of family system commonly practised in the study communities. The study found that 66% were polygamous families while 34% were monogamous. The general belief is that, fostered children in polygamous families tend to do a lot of domestic chores and the likelihood of them being not properly cared for is high.

For the fostered children, the study reveals that, 67% of them live in polygamous homes. The rationale was to find out the extent to which fostered children were cater for and the amount of household chores they are engaged in. This is because, most polygamous families tend to be fairly larger than monogamous families. When children are many in a household, the likelihood for them to compete for the limited facilities1 is high, i.e. the tendency for there to be pressure on the household resources/facilities is greater if the household is not endowed with resources. In large family houses, girls, may tend to be used for domestic chores to supplement household income at the expense of their studies.

Number of dependents
The number of dependents of the household heads did not significantly vary from community to community. The survey indicates that about 87% of the households have 5 or more dependents. Only 13% have between 1 to 5 dependents. Considering the income levels of these respondents, it means that most families were overstretched by the number of their dependents.

With regards to the fostered children, 13% indicated that they live in families of less than five people. Forty-six percent (46%) indicated that they live in families of between 6 and 10 people, while 41% say they live in families of more than 11 people.

4.2 The nature and extent of child fosterage
Child fosterage is deeply entrenched in the Dagomba society, especially in the rural communities. As indicated earlier, 43.2% of Dagomba women above 16 years and 18% of men were brought up by people either than their biological parents. This finding corroborates with that of [11] who states that Dagomba men used to prefer marrying fostered girls to those who were raised by their biological parents. This partly explains why the percentage of respondents who had been fostered was high among those of 16 and above years. One of the interesting finding of the study was that, children as young as two and half years were fostered. Such children are usually taken away as soon as their mothers deliver after

1 In terms of accommodation, children may be crowded in a room and may not have space to effectively study at home.
them. The survey indicates that about 47% of the fostered children do not know the age at which they were taken away from their parents. The majority of the foster parents indicated that they prefer fostering children at that age. They indicated that the best time to adopt a child is to take him/her when he/she is still small. They mentioned that such children normally grow up without knowing their biological parents. This makes it easier to control and to raise them. To buttress this point, two of the women during the focus group discussion at Kpene indicated that they did not know their biological parents until they were mature and were about to get married.

Another dimension of fostering in these communities is that the biological mothers of the fostered children may not be allowed to visit their children. The reason given is that women are emotional and when they are allowed to visit children in their foster homes and find out that they are badly treated, they may influence the child to run away from the foster home, or may pick a quarrel with the foster parent and this may damage the family relation and for which purpose the child is fostered. Even if the child is fostered within the same locality, the mother may not visit her/him.

On the other hand, if a fostered child gets to know her/his biological parents, she/he may be prevented from visiting them regularly. Even if she/he visits the parents, the visit is normally short and not regular to avoid being “negatively influenced”. Some fostered children may not know or be told of their biological parents until they are due for marriage. Some would get to know that they do not stay with their biological parents through other sources such as play mates, or other women in the house.

The study also found that parents may not give food, money, clothing or anything to their children without passing it through their foster parents. The reason is that, the child is “fostered to learn lesson” of life and such lessons can be best taught by the foster parents. They are supposed to stay with their foster parents “for better for worse” as one of the respondents put it. She went further to add that “even if the foster parents have nothing to feed on and feed on grasses, the child must also eat the grasses”.

4.3 Extent of fosterage in the study communities

Respondents were asked whether or not there were fostered children in their homes and if yes, how many boys and girls. They were further asked whether they were in school or not, and if yes, how many of the boys were in school and how many of the girls were in school.

Kpene has the highest number (about 45%) of houses with 4 to 5 fostered children. The next highest communities are Kpanvo (about 35%) and Sognayili (about 34%). regards to houses with 1 or 2 fostered Bamvim recorded 48%, Nguru 46%, Kalariga about 41% and Johnshegu about 41%. On the other hand, Kasalugu (58%) recorded the highest number of houses without fostered children, followed by Chanshegu (45%) and Johnshegu about 38%. From the Figure 7 again, it is clear that, apart from Kasalugu which has 58% of houses without fostered children, over 50% of houses in the rest of the communities have at least 1 fostered child.

With regards to the gender of the fostered children in these communities, generally, in all the communities, fostered children were dominated by girls than boys. Girls constituted 63.8% of fostered children in all the communities. However, Kpanvo recorded the highest (75%) number of fostered girls, follow by Banvim, (70%), Kasalugu (68%) and Sognayili (67%). In terms of boys, Chanshegu recorded the highest figure (45%), follow by Kpene (42%) and Nguru (41%). However, Kpanvo recorded the lowest (25%) number of fostered boys.

4.4 Factors that encourage fosterage

One of the critical factors that contribute to the situation of fosterage is the practice call ‘Prinsi’ singular is ‘pringa’. This is a practice, where a woman’s first pregnancy is officially announced to her by her sister-in-law at a family ceremony. 3

3 Traditionally when a woman is pregnant for the first time, the family head of her husband’s family man consults diviners or mallams to choose among the sisters of the man would officially announce to the woman that she is pregnant. When one of the sisters is chosen, a mallam prepares a talisman and write some verses of the Qur’an on a slate and wash it to be given to the pregnant woman. The family of the man fixes a day and the sister comes to announce the pregnancy. She would say to the pregnant woman “you were a child but now you are

2 Hard work, respect for elders, etc. For girls to become good mothers and house wives in future.
When the woman delivers, that child is usually given to the aunt who officially “announced” the pregnancy. Every Dagomba woman and man knows that such children are usually earmarked for their ‘pribu’ or aunts. Unless the aunt says she is not interested, the parents cannot keep such a child.

The study found out that the prinsi is still widely practiced and therefore, enforced fosterage. Thirty five percent (35%) of the children, mostly girls are fostered under this circumstance. When respondents were asked whether they will give their daughters to their sisters or sister-in-laws, an overwhelming majority (over 60%) said yes. The explanation respondents frequently gave was that it has been their cultural practice and “we got up to meet it like that”.

On the other hand the sister of a man can request that she be given her nice to support her in her household work. More often than not, such fostered girls may be about 8 years or more. This is the age when they can actually assist in the domestic chores of their aunts. Fostered children under this circumstance are usually not in school. In a situation where they are sent to school, they are usually older than their peers in class. Usually women who are traders or have young children or no child request for their brothers or relatives children, preferably, girls.

Old age

Another factor responsible for fosterage and adoption is the old age of a woman’s parents. Normally when a man or a woman grows old, the daughter in consultation with her husband gives their daughter or son to their grandmother or grandfather. It is believed that at that age the person is old and needs support.

The study indicates that, the education of fostered children under their grandparents care is more precarious than other fostered children. Their attendance at school is more irregular. Perhaps, because of the old age of the grandparents, and the fact that there is a joking relationship between grown and matured”. She then put the talisman on the neck of the pregnant woman. The concoction prepared by the mallam is given to her to drink to protect her and the pregnancy. Before this ceremony, one cannot refer to the woman as a pregnant woman. Who ever does that risk being fined at the chief palace.

Skills and knowledge acquisition

Some children are adopted or fostered because their parents want them to learn some particular skills or acquire some knowledge to prepare the child for life. Some of these skills are traditional professions and include ‘lunsi’ or drummers, blacksmiths, weavers, butchers, ‘wanzam’ (barbers), fiddlers and learning of the Holy Qur’an. In all these traditional professions, boys are usually preferred.

The study reveals that, all these forms of adoption/fosterage are still going on. However, the number of children involved in these is minimal (only about 3%) were adopted under these circumstances. However, apart from learning of the Qur’an, all the other traditional professions mentioned above are lineage or family professions and the skills are transmitted from generation to another. Therefore, children fostered under these circumstances usually have a common ancestor with their master or have consanguinital relationship with their masters.

Death and Inheritance

The death of a man or a woman may also result in their children being fostered by relatives. If the children are young, the girls may be given to their aunts, while the boys go to their uncles or grandmothers, grandfathers or other relatives. Usually, a nephew (if the deceased is man) or niece (if is a woman) is appointed by the family members as the “owner of the funeral”. He/she practically or symbolically takes control over the affairs of the funeral till the end. Such a person may take some of the children of the deceased to bring up.

Irrespective of age, death of a man or a woman puts them into permanent fosterage situations. Fosterage in such cases is practiced in two distinct forms: when the child is still young then the child turns to be over engaged in domestic activities at the expense of their study.

\footnote{Grandchildren normally refer to their grandmothers as their husbands while boys call them their friends.}
4.5 Reasons for fosterage

The study reveals that three major reasons account for the practice of fosterage in the study communities. These are (i) maintenance of family ties; (ii) preparation of the child for future and (iii) assist to their grandparents.

The first and the most important reason for fosterage is to maintain family bonds. This accounts for over 60% of the fosterage cases in the study communities. According to the respondents, fosterage is the most effective means of binding families together. They frequently mentioned that, through fosterage, the two families would be obliged to visit each other from time to time. The fostered child would also grow up to treat his/her half brothers and sisters as well as his or her siblings as family members.

The survey found that, it does not matter where the relatives stay, parents are ready to send their children to their relatives under all circumstances; whether they stay in town or in rural communities; it does not also matter whether they stay in the same community or in different community; whether the foster parents are poor or rich. It does not also matter whether the community the child is being sent has school or not, and whether the foster parent would send them to school or not. All these circumstances have negative effects on the education of the fostered child, especially the girl child.

The second reason often advanced for fosterage is to prepare the child for future. The study reveals that people in these communities send their children to their relatives because they believed that it is only these people who can teach them the values of life. The majority of the respondents, especially the elderly, believe that children raised by their biological parents do not respect, are not hardworking, are careless, or do not know the traditions. They also claimed that parents normally do not mete out stiff sanctions to their children when they go wrong. They added that they often pamper the children and this, as they put it “spoil them”. They contended that for children to become successful in life, to have respect and sympathy for others, they must be raised by others than their biological parents. One of the elderly men at Sognayili observed:

“When my daughter who is with her aunt visits me, she always kneels down and greets me. She respects and reveres me and her mothers more than her brother and sisters staying with me. She works hard and does not complain about flimsy things. There is a vast difference between her and her siblings and half brothers and sisters who are not fostered. I admire her life and believe she can fit in every society. I wish I could send all my children to their aunts”.

Similar views were expressed by foster parents. They think their fostered children revere them and work for them more than their own children.

This finding corroborates that of [1] who stated that fostered children tended to develop into better citizens capable of withstanding odds and hardships and worthy of social respect than children raised by their biological parents. According to him, it was not unusual for male suitors to decline to marry girls who were brought up by their biological parents. This contributed immensely to the promotion of fosterage in Dagbon [1].

The third justification for fosterage was to provide assistance to grandparents. This occurs in a situation where the grandparents have “nobody” to support them. They indicated that, their age, old people need to be assisted at all times. It was found out that, grandmothers, always prefer fostering girls to boys. On the other hand, grandfathers also prefer fostering boys.

4.6 Type of foster parents

The study also found out from the fostered children the categories of people who fostered them. Table 1 presents the details.

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5 These values include; hard work, respect, judicious use of resources, dutifulness, leadership skills/qualities, the tradition and culture of Dagomba and know the history of heir families. For girls, they learn how to be hardworking and become good housewives; how to better manage their lives and their families, how to properly care for their husbands and their children, etc.
From Table 1 it is clear that, the majority (63%) of the fostered children are with their aunts. Grandmothers are the second highest (22.5%) category of foster parents. This also buttresses the point that girls are the majority of fostered children.

### 4.7 Fosterage and educational inequality

The survey indicates that the daily activities of fostered children, especially girls, could be a stumbling block on their education. As stated earlier, one of the reasons for fosterage is to assist in the domestic chores of the foster parent and not to attend school. As a result, fostered children have to discharge their duties before they go to school or after they close from school. In some cases, they have to forfeit attending school to be able to perform their duties at home. Table 6 depicts some of the daily activities of the children.

### Table 2: Daily Activities of Fostered Girls

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Daily Activities of Fostered Girls</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sweeping of compound</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washing dishes</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking care of children</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fetching water</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running errands</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selling provisions</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Field survey, 2013.

The extent to which fostered girls are engaged in domestic chores affects their academic work. As depicted on Table 2, some of the daily activities of the fostered children contribute to their late attendance at school. Interestingly, the majority of the foster parents do not see anything wrong with this. After all, the main purpose for which they are fostered is partly to support their foster parents in the domestic chores. For the majority of the foster mothers, education of these girls is secondary.

### 4.8 School and learning challenges of fostered children

From Table 3, it is clear that fostered children who do not attend school regularly are more prevalent among girls (average 26%) than boys (average 16%). For those without proper school uniform, the average percentage for girls is lower (8%) than boys (16%) in all the communities.
Table 3 presents details of the situation of fostered children in the ten communities who do not attend school regularly, those without proper school uniform, those without the required number of exercise books as well as those who go to school late. For instance, Nyereshee has on the average (33%), the highest percentage of fostered children who do not attend school regularly. With regard to poor school attendance between the male and female fostered children, the later recorded the highest (44%) at Nyereshee. However, Chanshegu and Johnshegu recorded, on the average, the lowest percentage (12%) of fostered children who do not attend school regularly.

4.9 Home level and learning challenges of fostered children

Certain conditions at home make it difficult for children to study. These conditions are for fostered girls than boys. The survey examined the conditions at home in terms of learning environment, whether or not children have time to do their home work, whether or not they to eat before going to school, and after break whether the children go back to school, whether or not they have ever travelled to work on peoples’ farms or as heard porters to raise money to support their education, etc. The details are shown for fostered boys and girls.

On these variables, the survey reveals that both fostered girls and boys are caught up in these circumstances. On average about 59.5% of the boy do not have a good atmosphere to learn at home as against 65% of the girls. Some of these conditions include no/poor electricity, overcrowded in rooms, no furniture to study, lack of concentration/interruption due to disturbance of brothers and sisters, etc.

For those who reported that they do not have time to do their home work or study at home, the survey reveals that on the average, about 42.8% are boys while 57.1% are girls. Some of the common reasons raised include, attending Qur’anic classes in the evening, running errands, household chores, selling provisions for their foster parents, etc.

With regard to those who often go to school hungry, boys recorded 18.8% for all communities, while girls are 24.7%. For those who frequently do not return to school after break time, the average score for boys in all communities is 24.6%, while girls are 30.2%. For children who have travelled to work as head porters or work to earn some money to either support their education or their families, the average for boys is 56% while girls is 48%. Consistently, with the exception of the last variable (i.e. travel to work) where girls were fewer than boys, in all the cases, girls are always more than boys. It therefore implies that fosterage has negative consequences on girls more than boys. In other words, it affects girls’ education more than boys in the same conditions.

**Table 4: Home Conditions of fostered Boys**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Community</th>
<th>% without conducive learning environment at home</th>
<th>% who do not have time to study at home</th>
<th>% who often go hungry</th>
<th>% who often do not return to school after break</th>
<th>% ever traveled in search of work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Banvim</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Field survey, 2013.
The home conditions of most fostered children are hostile for their educational development. The study found out that, on average, 48% of the fostered children indicated they have traveled to work as head porters or go to the towns in south to do menial work during holidays.

4.10 School Drop-out
The drop-out rate for fostered children in the ten communities is averaged at 34.5% (31.9% for boys and 37% for girls). This means that on average, fostered children who had stopped attending school and later on continued constituted stands at 34.5%. However, a figure of 17% was ‘not sure’ or did not respond to this question. Kalariga has the highest (50%) number of fostered children who had dropped out of school follow by Johnshegu (45%), Kpene and Nguru (40%). On the other hand, communities which recorded the lowest figures of fostered children who dropped out of school are Kpanvo (20%) and Banvim (25%).

Respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they have ever dropped out of school. The results are contained on Table 10. The results show that generally 34.5% and 48.5% of the respondents answered YES and NO, respectively, while 17% was not sure or did not respond to this question.

Generally on average, 24.5% (21.9% boys and 27% girls) of fostered children had dropped out or permanently dropped out of school. For the girls, Nguru recorded the highest figure for the girls (36%).

The findings so far indicate that the causes of school drop-out in the study area are many. The major ones were too much domestic work, poor performance at school, poverty, farming, lack of parental support, neglect; travelling to work as head porters and lack of encouragement were cited as some of the reasons for drop out. Early marriage and teenage pregnancy were also cited as reasons for girls drop-out from school.

Another issue is lack of adequate interest in education by pupils. This leads to truancy on the part of pupils. Apathy on the part of parents further worsens the situation since parents do not make the effort to find out whether children attend school or not.

Other factors are teenage pregnancy and kayayo which result from financial constraints. It was revealed that the major occupation is farming (occupational distribution) which is subsistence in nature. Income earned from subsistence farming is meager and cannot support children’s education leading to other problems like out-migration, where children migrate to southern Ghana to work, they are unable to acquire the expected income and some do not get back in school upon return. The inadequacy of the classrooms also discourages both parents and pupils. Both parents and pupils do not take school seriously.

Finally, lack of potable water affects pupils’ attendance and performance leading to increased drop-out. For communities close to Tamale town, the study reveals that most of the boys are engaged in apprentice in vulcanizing and being mechanics. In terms of poor enrolment of fostered children at primary school, the findings indicate that poverty is a key reason. Many parents complained of lack of money to meet the school needs of their children.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Drop-Out Rate</th>
<th>Boys (%)</th>
<th>Girls (%)</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chanshegu</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyereshere</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalariga</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kasalugu</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kpanvo</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kpene</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnshegu</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nguru</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sognayili</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total average</td>
<td><strong>59.9</strong></td>
<td><strong>42.8</strong></td>
<td><strong>18.8</strong></td>
<td><strong>24.6</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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6 Sognayili, Banvim, Kalariga and Kpanvo
4.11 Do biological parents support Fostered children?
The study also set out to determine whether the fostered children get financial and material support from their parents. With the exception of Kpanvo, Kpene and Johnshego, where about 22.4%, 22% and 21% respectively indicated they get support from their fathers and mothers, in each of the rest of the communities, less than 20% of fostered children get support from their parents. The details are presented in figure 7.

During the focus group discussion at Kpene, one of the women remarked:

“One cannot even buy something for her daughter who is with her aunt or give her money. You can only do these under cover. When you do this, the aunt will interpret it to mean that you consider her to be poor and cannot buy these things for the girls. Some may say you want to influence the girl to run away from her. These can create confusion between you and your husband if not properly managed”.

During the focus group discussions, it was revealed that, the biological parents of the child have no responsibility to the child once he/she is fostered. The child’s health, feeding, education, clothing, etc are now the responsibility of the foster parents. In most cases, the parents of the child, especially the mother may not visit the child in her fostered home. This is common among children fostered by their aunts. Under such circumstances, whatever happens to the child is still considered as part of the “training”.

Life Stories

5. Conclusions

Fostering is deeply entrenched in the culture of the Dagomba who form about 99% of these communities. In many cases the practice of fostering is linked to superstition, witchcraft and the ancestors. The people believe that, foster parents, especially the aunts have some kind of supernatural powers that can be invoked on any fostered child whose parents want to take her away without their concerned. These make it difficult for fostered children to break away from these circumstances, even if they are not properly treated. The study found that, in some cases, it seems there is an element of force or right to foster the children. Aunts who announce the pregnancy have the ‘right’ to foster the child, even if the economic condition of this woman is not good. This may put the education of fostered children in danger; especially when the woman is in polygamous marriage and has no strong income generating activity.

Aunts seem to have complete control over their fostered children even more than their own children. They believe that, children belong to the man and therefore, her brothers’ children are her ‘real’ children and not her biological children who belong to her husband and his family. Foster mothers believe that, it is their duty to bring up the children in a way that will make them fit for society. Therefore, fostering is seen as training ground for the children. In view of this, the child should be able to do all kind of work to prepare him/her for adult life. The principal reason for fostering is to support the foster parents in their domestic, farming and business activities. Fostered children are often overburdened with domestic activities rather than academic work. As a result, schooling is secondary.

One factor that contributes to the perpetuation of fostering is the practice of “prinsi” a situation where men use their sisters to announce the first pregnancy of their wives. Children born out of these pregnancies, especially girls are automatically earmarked for fostering by their aunts.

In many instances, foster parents ‘pretend’ that they support the education of the fostered children. However, during the focus group discussions, it was revealed in most cases foster parents do not see the education of their fostered children as their priority.

The study indicates that 56% of fostered children are girls while 44% are boys. This means that girls are preferred to boys in fostering. Fosterage also affects girls more negatively than boys.

The results of the study indicate that fosterage has outlived its usefulness and must be cribbed or modified to save the future of the fostered child. Apart from being discriminatory, the fostered child is being used at the expense of their education. Lastly, the purpose for which fostering is being perpetrated is defeated if the child is trained in tradition and culture at the expense of his/her education.
References


