ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Children's lives in an era of school closures: Exploring the implications of COVID-19 for child labour in Ghana

Abdul-Rahim Mohammed ⓘ

Faculty of Sustainable Development Studies, University for Development Studies, Tamale, Ghana

Correspondence
Abdul-Rahim Mohammed, Faculty of Sustainable Development Studies, University for Development Studies, P.O. Box TL 1350, Tamale, Ghana.
Email: mrahim@uds.edu.gh

Abstract

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Subsequently, governments worldwide implemented strict regimes of lockdowns and school closures to contain the transmission of the virus. Ghana's government on 15 March 2020 also announced a lockdown and closure of schools, lasting up till January 2021. Against this backdrop, the paper examined the implications of school closures on child labour in Ghana. Qualitative data for the study were collected between October 2020 to February 2021 in a small rural community in northern Ghana. Findings from 16 semi-structured interviews with schoolchildren aged 8–13 years show how school closures have meant that children from contexts of poverty: (a) are driven into child labour as they are either forced to accompany their parents to work on farms or sell foodstuff by the roadside; and thus, ultimately (b) engage in no learning during the lockdown period.

KEYWORDS

child labour, Children's education, COVID-19, Ghana, school closures

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented change and uncertainty, wreaking havoc on health and economic systems worldwide (Chaturvedi et al., 2021). Emerging from China's

city of Wuhan in December 2019 (Kapasia et al., 2020) the virus quickly spread around the globe (Shereen et al., 2020). Due to the virus's rapid transmission, governments swiftly implemented lockdowns (banning people from leaving their homes, implementing school and work closures, and limiting mass gatherings amongst others) to curb the spread of the virus (Dafuleya, 2020; Hargreaves & Logie, 2020; Johnson & Roberto, 2020). Preliminary studies suggest that the economic, social, and health costs of the pandemic are dire and distressing. For instance, the International Monetary Fund (2020) estimates that the global economy would contract by −3%, with global income potentially reduced by $2 trillion (UNCTAD, 2020). Consequently, there are fears that COVID-19 will lead to significant increases in global poverty rates, potentially reversing the progress made against poverty in recent decades (Sumner et al., 2020).

The human and social costs of the pandemic have been equally substantial and unsettling, if not worse. Worldwide, the World Health Organisation (WHO) reports that 494 million people had contracted the COVID-19 virus with 6 million confirmed deaths as of April 5, 2022 (WHO, 2022). By all metrics, these numbers of deaths are staggering. Apart from the sheer scale of deaths, a growing body of literature has documented the significant human and social costs of the pandemic. Yoosefi Lebni et al.'s (2022) phenomenological study into the lived experiences of COVID-19 victims' families in Tehran shows in detail, the challenges families go through in caring for COVID-19 victims (such as the disruption of family life and limited access to health care). Their study also highlights the difficulties families go through after a COVID-19 patient's death (such as lonely burials and lack of proper farewell rites to the dead). As such, their study underscores the emotional difficulties families go through whilst caring for their loved ones infected by COVID-19.

Similarly, Karimi et al. (2021) show that the pandemic places a greater burden on the poor and vulnerable, not least because this group tend to live in crowded places and thus is more vulnerable to the virus. Further, poor and vulnerable people might suffer more income losses and therefore might be compelled to break lockdown rules in search of jobs. For instance, sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has a large informal sector (Ebuenyi, 2020), as it employs about 86% of the continent's workforce (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2018). Informal sector workers are usually daily labourers, domestic workers, and street vendors who 'live from hand to mouth', and therefore, 'disrupting their activities by even a day could mean food deprivation' (Dafuleya, 2020, p. 254). Accordingly, implementing lockdowns in SSA implies that many 'household earners would be forced to choose between the virus and putting food on the table' (United Nations, 2020, p. 14).

Emerging literature shows that the impact of the pandemic (through the adoption of coping measures such as school closures, social distancing, and lockdowns) on children has been far-reaching. Haffejee et al.'s (2022) research with children from marginalised contexts in Brazil, Kenya, Pakistan, South Africa and Turkey demonstrates how children experience individual-level disruptions amongst other things. That is, children have difficulty adjusting to new COVID-19-inspired rules, adopting online learning and projecting internalising behaviour traits such as loneliness and sadness. Children also experience school-level disruptions (displaying sadness about school closures and missing friends) as well as community-level disruptions (reflected in their awareness of rising hunger and economic crisis in their communities) (Haffejee et al., 2022). These findings are not unique, as they align with Toros' (2021) study of the lived experiences of Estonian children in the context of COVID-19. Toros (2021) finds that Estonian children generally struggled with online learning, emotional well-being and social relationships. Cowie and Myers (2020) also report that the rate of domestic child abuse tripled after the lockdown. In their systematic review of the impact of quarantine on the mental health of children, Imran et al. (2020) disclose that children experience restlessness, anxiety, irritability and inattention during quarantine.

Considering the ease of spread of the virus and the scale of worldwide infections, the immediate concerns of governments have understandably been on addressing the health and economic impacts of COVID-19. Consequently, much of the COVID-19 literature has focused on the macroeconomic and health implications of the pandemic. What is yet to be understood is the extent of the pandemic's effects on children's lives. This is unsurprising, as children's voices have been largely excluded from the COVID-19 literature (Driscoll et al., 2021). Little policy attention has been paid to addressing the impact of the lockdown on children's education, health and well-being—particularly children in poor and vulnerable households and communities. Nonetheless, Kyriazis et al. (2020) rightly note that it is critical to specifically examine the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's education and health because children risk being the biggest victims of the pandemic's impact due to poverty, lack of education and social protection (United Nations, 2020). In this context, the paper helps to address this policy gap by providing empirical evidence that casts light on the silent effects of the pandemic on children's lives in Ghana. Specifically, this paper sets out to answer the question: *how have school closures and lockdowns impacted child labour in Ghana?*

CONNECTING THE DOTS BETWEEN SCHOOL CLOSURES AND CHILD LABOUR

The phenomenon of child labour is a pressing child development challenge facing many countries globally, but more prevalent in Global South (Kaur & Byard, 2021) countries such as Ghana. The practice is ubiquitous in the informal sector of the labour market of these countries. The ILO (2004), p. (16) defines child labour as:

> Work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development. It refers to work that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children and interferes with their schooling by depriving them of the opportunity to attend school or obliging them to leave school prematurely; or requiring them to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work.

Within the child labour literature, a distinction is made between child work and child labour. For example, it is not considered child labour when children help at home, if it is age-appropriate, not for excessive hours, or does not impede schooling (Bourdillon, 2006). This caveat is warranted to avoid labelling all kinds of child work as child labour (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 1997). The ILO and UNICEF (2021) estimate that 160 million children (63 million girls and 97 million boys) were in child labour worldwide at the beginning of 2020. Whilst these are sobering and disconcerting statistics, they nonetheless mask regional variations and progress. Between 2016 and 2020, child labour participation rates in Asia, the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean experienced a steady decline, although such a positive trend eluded SSA (ILO & UNICEF, 2021). Accordingly, SSA is the region with the highest prevalence and the largest number of child labourers. Whereas 3.8 million children in Europe and Northern America, and 8.2 million children in Latin America and the Caribbean are trapped in child labour, 86.6 million children in SSA are child labourers (ILO & UNICEF, 2021). Grim forecasts suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic might exacerbate the issue by pushing a further 8.9 million children into child labour by 2022 if urgent steps are not taken (ILO & UNICEF, 2021).

The reasons for, and implications of children working are both complex and multi-layered. Multiple and intersecting factors accounting for the prevalence of child labour have been

identified in the literature as household poverty and the need for children to contribute towards household income, the lack of access to quality education, parental attitudes, and perceptions about education. On the contrary, child labour implies that children are deprived of their right to education (a huge barrier to education as it affects attendance and performance), exposes them to violence and harm, and perpetuates the intergenerational transmission of poverty as child labourers mainly enter adulthood with inadequate skills and competencies for work, consigning them to low paid and temporary jobs (ILO, 2006, p. 2015).

Ghana, like many other SSA countries, has a child labour problem. Even before the pandemic struck, as many as 21.8% of children between the ages of five and 17 years were engaged in child labour (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014). Most of Ghana's child labourers work in agriculture, especially in the country's chief export crop (cocoa farming). Others also work in mining, head porterage, hawking, and quarries, amongst others (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014). In a 2015 report titled *Precious Metal, Cheap Labour*, Human Rights Watch (2015) chronicles the hazardous nature of children working in Ghana's artisanal and small-scale gold mining sector. They note that child labourers in the mining sector are exposed to hazardous substances such as mercury, which affects their central nervous system, with potential life-long disabilities. Also, child labourers suffer a lot of physical pain and accidents through carrying or lifting heavy loads (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Finally, the report shows how child labourers often skip classes or entire school days and sometimes drop out of school (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Hence, education and child labour are inextricably linked, as child labour is a significant barrier to education (UNICEF, 2014).

CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

On 12 March 2020, the government of Ghana confirmed the country's first case of COVID-19 (Ghana Health Service, 2020). Growing steadily, the number of confirmed cases increased to 91 928 with 777 deaths in April 2021 (Ghana Health Service, 2020). As the number of cases rose, worry and anxiety gripped the country. The anxieties were well-founded, considering the human capital, institutional and financial challenges that have beset health systems in developing countries. If the governments in Africa did not act with haste to halt the spread of the virus, the general feeling was that much of Africa's healthcare systems would be quickly overwhelmed (Lone & Ahmad, 2020). Like many countries worldwide the government of Ghana on 15 March 2020 implemented a national lockdown, closing all schools, banning public gatherings, and suggesting social/physical distancing protocols (by April 2020, 186 countries had implemented national lockdowns [UNESCO, 2020]). The present study, therefore, explores what this closure of schools means for child labour.

Creswell (2014) and Maxwell (2013) note that a qualitative design is most suitable for exploring the lived experiences of participants. Accordingly, to understand children's experiences of child labour in the context of school closures as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the study employed a qualitative design. As a qualitative study, the paper benefits from one-on-one semi-structured interviews with 16 schoolchildren (aged 8–13) and one headteacher from *Ting-sheli* (a pseudonym to anonymise the field site and responses from the participants). The one-on-one semi-structured interviews helped the researcher to gain in-depth information about child labour in times of a pandemic, leading to the provision of 'rich' data. *Ting-sheli* is a small rural farming community in northern Ghana that has just one state school and a clinic catering to the needs of the inhabitants. *Ting-sheli* was not randomly selected for this research. Rather, through convenience sampling (Lavrakas, 2008), this field site was purposely selected because of the author's familiarity with the community. Given the limitations and uncertainty imposed by the pandemic on people's lives, the author opted for convenience sampling as a

way of mitigating the practical challenges of doing fieldwork in these difficult and challenging times. Data were collected between October 2020 and February 2021.

Since *Ting-sheli* has only one state-run primary school, the headteacher of the school served as the gatekeeper to accessing the community. The researcher approached the headteacher, discussed the objectives of the research and then sought permission to interview him. Having agreed to be interviewed, the date and location were agreed upon for the interview. Following the interview with the headteacher, the researcher asked for assistance to access the parents and caregivers in the community. Subsequently, the headteacher called for a meeting with the parents and caregivers. At the said meeting, he introduced the researcher to the parents who turned up. The researcher was then allowed to address the parents and caregivers, explaining the research and its objectives to them. Then, the parents were asked if they would consent to their children participating in the research. Of the 35 parents and caregivers who attended the meeting, 21 agreed that their children could take part. The remaining parents either showed no interest or explained that their children had travelled to see relatives in the urban areas.

Having reached an agreement with the 21 parents, they asked their children to meet the headteacher and researcher the following week Saturday in the local school. On the agreed date, 20 schoolchildren turned up at the school premises. These children were then taken through the objectives and aims of the research and why their participation was needed. At the end of this interaction, the pupils were then asked to volunteer to participate in the research. Of the 20 schoolchildren who turned up initially that day, only 16 volunteered to participate in the study. It was agreed that the interviews could only come off once a week, on Fridays (a non-farming) day at the school premises. To ensure that all the students would not turn up on a particular day (as this was a one-on-one semi-structured interview), the researcher and the students decided on an interview schedule. The interviews were conducted through the following interview guide:

- What do you understand about the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What has changed in your daily life? How do you feel about the changes?
- What have you been doing during the period of the school closure? What are your daily routines like? Do you like this new routine? Explain.
- Is there anything you have missed about school?
- Do you engage in any learning (for example extra classes)?
- Do you participate in the government's distance learning programme? If not, why not?
- What do you like (if any) about school closures?
- What should be done about the pandemic and school closure?

After the end of the interviews with the students, another interview was conducted with the headteacher. This provided the researcher with the opportunity of double-checking some of the claims made by the students.

Ethical consideration

The context of a national lockdown and school closures presented significant difficulties to the researcher. First, the local university (and indeed all universities and schools) from which the ethical clearance for this study would have been sought was closed throughout 2020, reopening in January 2021. Furthermore, a lockdown of the capital city Accra also meant that ethical clearance could not be sought from the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection. Second,

the researcher was in a dilemma regarding when to collect the data for this paper. Rather than wait for the uncertain end of the lockdown and school closures, the collection of data for the study commenced in October 2020 (7 months into the imposition of school closures and restrictions on movements). The assumption underpinning this decision was that the paper would benefit from engaging students during the actual lockdown period, rather than waiting till the end of lockdown. Another source of reassurance was that when the data collection started, studies revealed that children were less likely than adults to contract the virus (see Bhopal et al., 2021; Dong et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2020).

Despite the operational and contextual difficulties posed by school closures and lockdowns, some steps were taken to ensure that the research was conducted ethically. As already discussed above, the pupils were accessed through adult gatekeepers (headteacher and parents/caregivers). The schoolchildren were briefed on the nature of the research, why their participation was being sought and what form that participation would take. They were told in the presence of the headteacher that they were not under any obligation to participate in the study. Of those who volunteered to participate, the schoolchildren were told they could leave the interviews at any time without the need to explain why. Three of the upper primary 6 students signed consent forms after they were read out and explained to them. The rest of the students did not sign the forms as they said they had 'no signature' because they had never been asked to sign their signature before.

Furthermore, all the one-on-one semi-structured interviews with the children were conducted in the school, with the headteacher present in the adjourning classroom. Seeing as COVID-19 was still raging, the researcher wore nose masks and kept a 2-meter physical distance during the interviews. Also, all the 16 students who participated in the study were presented with a box of nose masks each (containing 50 nose masks). On the days of the interviews, the children also wore their nose masks excitely, as they said they had never worn one before—although they saw visitors to the community wearing them. At the end of each interview session, every student was given GHS 25 ($5) as a token of appreciation for their time. Finally, in presenting the findings, all responses from pupils and headteacher, as well as the location of the school have been anonymised.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used in analysing the qualitative data collected for the paper. The study adopted an inductive bottom-up approach of thematic analysis. With this method of analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 83) explain that the themes that emerge following data analysis are strongly linked to the data set in a way that 'bears some similarity to grounded theory'. The choice of inductive thematic data analysis was practical in the sense that the extant literature on the impacts of the pandemic in the Global South mainly focuses on COVID-19's impact on businesses and economies as well as governments' fiscal and health care responses to the pandemic. Therefore, in choosing the inductive bottom-up approach to data analysis, the researcher did not have to come to the data with preconceived themes; the data determined the themes.

In terms of the actual process of data analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest a six-step process: familiarisation with the data; generating initial codes, searching for themes amongst the codes; reviewing the identified themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report on the findings. Adapting these steps, all the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and read thoroughly to enable the researcher to familiarise himself with the data set. Subsequently, the transcripts were re-read and coded, generating a list of initial codes. These codes were then examined, identifying patterns amongst similar codes to generate

themes. The emergent themes were then reviewed to ensure they accurately reflect the data. The themes that satisfied this criterion were then defined, creating major themes. The major themes are presented below.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the interview questions, two major themes were identified as the pathways through which lockdowns impact children's everyday lives: (a) a rise in child labour participation rate and (b) children's disconnect from learning. These themes are discussed subsequently after a brief exploration of schoolchildren's understanding of the pandemic.

Participants' knowledge of the pandemic

One of the icebreaker questions in the interviews was about testing their knowledge of the pandemic. All the schoolchildren reported at least some basic knowledge of COVID-19, its mode of transmission and how to prevent the spread of the virus. They either referenced the President's periodic Addresses to the Nation (at the height of the pandemic) or claimed that they got to know about the pandemic through their parents and announcements on the local radio stations. They noted:

> My mother says Conora [Corona] disease is in the air … and that we should not go near strange people (Girl, 10-year-old.)

> The last time on Radio Fiila, the President said the virus is everywhere and it dangerous (Boy, 9-year-old).

> As for me, I cover my mouth when am talking to people. I don't want to die … my mother says if you don't cover your mouth you will get it (Girl, 11-year-old).

Whilst these schoolchildren demonstrated awareness of the existence of the virus, they nonetheless attributed the origins of the virus to superstitious beliefs.

> My *mallam* [Muslim Cleric] says God is angry with us and he is punishing us (Girl, 13-year-old).

> My father said we did something and the gods are not happy (Girl, 12-year-old).

> Mother says the China people created the virus to kill us (Boy, 8-year-old).

Through adults such as religious clerics and parents, prevailing societal superstitious beliefs about the pandemic were transferred to these schoolchildren, noting amongst other things that the virus was created by the Chinese to wipe off humanity from the world, or that it was God's way of demonstrating anger against humankind. More importantly, the interviews quickly dovetailed into the more consequential matters of the impact of the pandemic on their daily lives.

The intersections of school closures and child labour

Narrating how the pandemic had changed their daily lives, all the schoolchildren noted that they missed going to school. When probed further, they reported that their lives are now 'difficult', as every day they have to accompany their parents to the farm. On the way to the farm, and whilst on the farm, they note how they are made to 'work' till they are tired. Consider the following:

> Before [Previously], I just go to school in the morning and my father goes to farm. Now, every day I follow them to the farm. I want to go to school again (Boy, 10-year-old).

> Every day I have to follow my mother to the farm. It was not like that when they did not close the school. Me I want to go back to school again (Girl, 9-year-old).

> Before, I only go to farm a few days. Even that, master [headteacher] sometimes will not agree and he will be having problem with my father. But now that they close[d] the school, my father use[s] it (school closure) to take me to farm every day (Boy, 12-year-old).

> My mother sells yam on the road when you are coming to this place [highway to the community]. When she is going there she take[s] me with her and we will be selling the yams (Girl, 11-year-old).

Through these extracts, the schoolchildren are seen making a constant comparison. They note how 'before' in the morning (before the start of the pandemic), the only place they had to go to was school. Those who did not go to school every day admitted only going to the farm a few days a week, as *Boy 12-year-old* explained. However, the school closure had disrupted this part of their morning routine by compelling them to follow their parents to the farm or to the roadside to sell yams every morning. Or, in the case of *Boy 12-year-old*, he no longer went to the farm for only a few days. The school closure had meant that he followed his parents to the farm every day. Following their parents to the farm did not reveal much. Thus, they were asked to explain why they preferred schooling compared to going to the farm with their parents.

> I like school because the farm place is very far. Before we get there, I am tired … Mama will give me the basket with the cutlass and food to be carrying to the farm. [**Question**: Are you asked to do anything on the farm?]. Yes, she gives me [a] cutlass and I will be weeding. Sometimes inside my hand will be paining me. Last week like this, we planted some seeds and covered it with sand. They were many. I was tired. The sun was in the sky. I want to go to school (Girl, 13-year-old).

> When we get to farm, my work is to go to the water place [stream] and fetch water and come and pour it on the plants. The water place is far, and I will be carrying water with my brothers. I do not fetch water in school … When we are going home, I will be tired. My back and neck will be paining me … the water is heavy (Girl, 11-year old).

> Last week when we went to the farm, my father gave me some medicine to pump on the plants. The medicine is smelling but he said it make the plants strong. I do not do this in school (Boy, 9-year-old).

> When we are on the road [highway], I will be afraid when car is coming fast fast [speeding]. When the car stops and the driver buys some [foodstuff], mama will tell me to carry it to the car. Sometimes it is plenty and heavy (Girl, 11-year-old).

These narrations show how children's day-to-day lives have been transformed as they are driven into child labour. In other words, in this community, the closure of the school has led to a rise in rates of child labour. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, child labour was a pressing human development challenge, particularly in SSA. UNICEF (2015) reports that in Ghana, 21% of all children aged 5–17 are engaged in child labour, with this rate doubling in rural areas. The high incidence of child labour in the SSA (even prior to the pandemic) has always been a source of worry to many governments and development partners, considering the negative impacts the phenomenon has on children's development and well-being.

In the context of this research, children's lives have worsened, as the pandemic has pushed them into child labour. The narrations from the children show how, due to school closures, they now have to walk 'far distances carrying baskets and cutlasses' to the farm (Girl, 13-year-old). As a result of carrying these items, and walking 'far' to the farm, she notes that even before they eventually get to the farm to start work, she is tired. Girl, 11-year-old also notes that her main duty on the farm is to go to a stream to fetch water to water the plants. She claims that carrying water up and down the stream gives her back and neck pain, as the water is heavy.

Boy, 12-year-old makes an important point above. He notes that before the pandemic, he only went to the farm occasionally. Now that school is closed, he argues that his father has taken advantage of the situation to force him to the farm every day. This point is particularly important as the pupil suggests that the headteacher sometimes intervenes during school days, if his father wants to take him to the farm. Sometimes, the resistance of the headteacher creates problems between him and the boy's father. Speaking about this issue, the headteacher noted:

> Another issue [that affects children's education] in this school is [the] farming and harvesting season. During this time, because this community is a farming community, most of them [parents] normally involve their children in the farming activities. The girls will go to the bush to harvest crops and they will pick shea nut and then sometimes they will come to school late at 9 am. Sometimes they do not come to school at all. When you ask [them why they are late], [they respond] 'my mother said I should go and pick shea nut.' If you come to this school at 7.30 am [during these seasons] you can count the number of girls. Almost all of them go picking shea nuts. The boys are also taken for planting crops and harvesting. Sometimes for a whole month, you pick a register in certain classes and a child will not be in school. When you ask why, the child says 'my father sent me to farm to help him.' Now that the school has been closed for 8 months now, every morning I see the children following their parents to the farm (Headteacher, *Ting-Sheli* School).

The head teacher's experiences, as captured above, reinforce the pupils' claims in multiple ways. First, as a farming community, parents have been taking their children out of school to the farm, sometimes for 1 month consecutively, as the headteacher stated. Even without COVID-19, the headteacher notes how during the farming season, parents disrupt the academic progress of students in his school as they are sent off to farms. This narration confirms *Boy, 12-year-old's* claim he only went to the farm for a few days in a week, prior to COVID-19. In fact, sometimes, the boy noted that the headteacher intervened by preventing his father from taking him to the farm. However, in the context of COVID-19 and school closures, the headteacher is unable to intervene. Accordingly, children who ordinarily would be in school, are sent to the farm *en masse*, with substantial potential impacts on their health and well-being, considering that they are asked to work in contexts that are inappropriate for their age. Further, Boy, 9-year-old's experience of 'pumping smelling medicine on the plants' confirms that child labourers sometimes work in hazardous conditions. Child labourers in agriculture are exposed to agrochemicals and pesticides as they work, with long-term health problems related to the use of these pesticides (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations [FAO], 2015).

The findings in this study further confirm the concerns and worries shared by the International Labour Organisation and the United Nations Children's Fund (2020) that school closures, on account of COVID-19 might lead to increased child labour participation rates. It is, therefore, imperative to amplify these risks experienced by children, as studies (see Watkins & Jameel, 2020) show that children who are driven into child labour for long periods might remain permanently out of school.

School closures and Children's learning

Discussing the impact of school closures on children's everyday lives would be incomplete if students were not asked to describe how the closure of school had affected their learning and education. Consequently, a portion of the interviews focused on children explaining how the pandemic had affected their education. Amongst other things, the schoolchildren noted that in the last 7 months (at the time of the interview), they were not engaged in any form of learning. The students had simply been cut off from formal education from the time of the school closure. Explaining what specifically they missed about the school, the students recounted how the lockdown had affected their education as:

> Now I don't learn again. I like reading and drawing. But they closed the school and I don't do it again [reading and drawing]. [**Question**: do you get homework from the school]? No. We don't see our masters [teachers] again. Some of them have travelled. [**Question**: Do you watch the reading and maths programme on GTV?]. We don't have light [electricity] and TV at home (Girl, 10-year-old).

> In school we were doing dance [drama and acting lessons] and English. Since they closed the school, we have not been doing it. We don't see our teachers again. Sometimes I see Master (headteacher) and he tell[s] me to read my old books. But me I can't do it. I don't understand anything (Boy, 12-year-old).

> Now we are not doing anything, only working in the farm. Even when you go to school, the place is close[d] and no one is there. Sometimes you see Master [head-teacher] and he will tell you to go and learn your books (Girl, 11-year-old).

What these extracts show is that the students have not received any interaction from their teachers since the government implemented the lockdown. As such, the pupils in the rural area are left on their own, receiving no instruction or education from their teachers. The headteacher substantiated these claims, noting that since the school was closed down, no arrangement was made for teachers to interact with their students. He stated:

> You know, many of the teachers are not natives of this place [community]. As soon as the government announced the lockdown, majority of them left to the bigger towns that very week. Even before the COVID-19, we had problems attracting teachers to this school because it is a rural area and has no potable water and other fine things like you have in the cities … So now, we don't meet the students at all. Sometimes I meet some of them and tell them to read their old books and redo their past homework. [**Question**: why don't you encourage them to use the virtual and distance platforms]? **Laughs** Many of them cannot afford electricity, let alone TVs and computers to benefit from the distance thing. As for the distance thing, it works only in the big cities and towns like Accra (national capital).

Taking the excerpts from the headteacher and pupils as a whole, the findings suggest that during the entire period of the lockdown, pupils in this community engaged in no learning. The school closure has severely disrupted teaching and learning, as similarly observed by UNESCO (2020). To mitigate the effects of school closures on teaching and learning, the Ghana Education Service introduced virtual and distance learning systems in April 2020 (Dome & Armah-Attoh, 2020). Radio and online programmes, as well as televised broadcasts, were the arrangements put in place to ensure that students continue to engage in learning (Graphic, 2020). Nevertheless, the data in this study show that for the inhabitants of this rural community, benefiting from a distance and virtual learning platforms appears an impossible task.

Findings from recent studies suggest that the experiences of these children in this rural community are not unique. In many African countries, it was found that children in rural communities engaged in no learning during the period of lockdown, as they lack access to television, radio, internet and computers (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Furthermore, data from the Ghana Centre for Democratic Development's (CDD-Ghana) survey confirms that students in rural areas especially, find it difficult to participate in remote learning because they lack the necessary devices (radio, internet, computers) and electricity needed to benefit from the system (Dome & Armah-Attoh, 2020). Indeed, the findings herein align with Kapasia et al.' (2020) study of the impact of lockdown on students' learning in West Bengal, India. Amongst other findings, they show how students from remote areas are unable to participate in online learning due to a lack of access to electricity and internet connectivity. Ultimately, this study concurs that the education of children in rural areas is in danger as they benefit less from online and remote learning (Adarkwah, 2021), mainly due to deficits in access to information and communications technology. Many schools and rural households simply do not have the capacity to benefit from remote learning.

In the end, the imposition of a system of lockdowns and school closures has not only disrupted children's education but has also led to a general worsening of children's welfare in northern Ghana, potentially exposing children to harm. The ultimate effect of this reality is that it has the potential of reversing the modest gains that have been realised over the years in terms of children's education, rights and welfare. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to seriously start and sustain discussions on the impact of school closures on children's everyday lives and education, particularly in northern Ghana. Even before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, significant spatial inequalities in access to education existed in Ghana. That is, educational achievement in northern Ghana was comparatively lower than in other regions. Samuel et al. (2013) analysis of Ghana's 2010 census report shows that the rate of illiteracy for 11-year-olds and above is more than 63% in northern Ghana. Accordingly, children from northern Ghana stand at a disadvantage, in terms of the impact of lockdown on their education. School closures, therefore, in this context, might deepen these pre-existing inequalities in educational attainment.

LIMITATION

Like many empirical studies, this paper has some limitations that must be acknowledged. The first limitation is that both the sample type and size employed in the study make generalisation challenging. Nonetheless, it is important to state that collecting data in times of a global pandemic comes with enormous challenges that require researchers to adapt. Whilst several other studies examining the impact of COVID-19 have relied on online surveys, for example, this approach was impractical in this context as the study was to be conducted in a rural area with no access to the internet and electricity. Second, it might also be argued that the perspectives of important stakeholders (such as parents) are missing in this piece. Nevertheless, it is important to state that whilst these are valid claims, the focus of the research was to examine the impact of COVID-19 on children's lives from their own perspectives.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted health care and economic systems worldwide, resulting in fiscal packages rolled out by governments to help contain the impacts of the pandemic. What has not received commensurate attention (probably because the full impact of the pandemic is yet to be understood) is government policies that are directed at protecting children against the effects of the pandemic, particularly in the global south contexts. Nonetheless, this empirical study has demonstrated how children are bearing the brunt of the pandemic, quietly and away from the gaze of policy-makers. Findings from the study show how a regime of school closures has pushed children from poor contexts into child labour, working in difficult circumstances and in activities that are inappropriate for their ages. Furthermore, these children engage in no learning, as the community lacks access to devices and infrastructure needed to engage in distance learning. In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic is a real and pressing danger to children in rural areas, undermining their education and well-being. What this paper might further us is that whilst it certainly is the case that African countries are not as severely hit compared to European

and American countries, the continent has by no means escaped the knock-on effect of the pandemic. Through school closures, one of the most vulnerable groups in society (children) is having their lives disrupted. It is not hard to imagine that children might live with the impacts of the pandemic for a long time to come. As part of efforts to mitigate the worst effects of the pandemic, it is time for governments and policy-makers to either equally institute or scale up an education recovery programme in addition to existing economic recovery programmes.

As the findings in this study show, schoolchildren in this rural context (even before the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic) are constantly at risk of being taken to farms to work as labourers. The closure of schools has only made this reality direr as parents no longer needed to engage resistant school staff in sending their children to work on farms. An education recovery programme that ensures that children attend school might help in addressing the child labour risks children are exposed to in rural farming communities. Studies from Ghana and other African contexts have shown that the implementation of government-funded school meals protects schoolchildren from engaging in child labour. Thus, the government of Ghana might consider extending the country's school feeding programme to rural farming communities where children are constantly at risk of being taken out of school and sent to farms.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID
Abdul-Rahim Mohammed https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3916-9386

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Abdul-Rahim Mohammed holds a Ph.D. in Social Policy from the University of Sheffield, UK. Presently, he is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Development Management and Policy Studies, University for Development Studies Ghana. His research interests include exploring the notion of Children's Agency in the Global South, Child Labour, Social Policies in the Global South, Policy Implementation Gaps (through the lens of street-level bureaucracy), and Inquiries into Food Insecurity. Methodologically, he has expertise in qualitative methods