

Child Labour among Public School Children: Need for School Social Work Intervention

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Abstract

Child labour among school children is a critical issue which effects their education and future success. This research study was focused on identifying the presence of labour activities among public school children, analyzing the labour factor with the chance/risk of school dropout and to assessing the prospects of school social workers in public schools particularly in facilitating the school children. A Mixed method approach with convergent parallel design was adopted. Total 100 students from grade 6 and grade 10 from public schools of tehsil City, district Lahore were selected by using proportional stratified random sampling technique. For qualitative part, teachers and parents of the students were interviewed. The inclusion Criteria for the students was poor attendance and poor grades. Result of this study indicates that students who were involved in labour had 1.83 times more chances to dropout from school as compared to those who were not involved in labour. This study suggests that the education policy should recognize the challenges confronted by students and should introduce school social work to address these issues.

Keywords: Child labour, School Attendance, Academic Achievement, School Dropout, School Social Work.

1. Introduction

Child labor remains a pervasive issue globally, significantly impacting school attendance and academic achievement among children. Child labor does not only deprive children from their basic right of education but also undermines their chances for future success. The problem of school dropout is of great socio-economic and human rights concern (Krüger et al., 2022) and due to dropout, people further face poverty, unemployment, social exclusion and poor health (Gherasim, 2022). On the other hand, education have a profound influence on any human society and stands as one of the foremost factors in alleviating poverty within disadvantaged and underprivileged communities.

Currently Pakistan is at second in terms of out-of-school children (OOSC), with 22.8 million children approximately from the ages 5 to 16. This accounts for huge number of population (44%) of this age (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2024). Likewise, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics reported in 2021 that 32% children from 5 to 16 years are out of school (PBS, 2021). Pakistan is experiencing a high dropout rate

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(ADB, 2019; Punjab Education Sector Reform Programme, 2019; UNICEF, 2024). Additionally, transition rate from primary to higher education is also low (ADB, 2019), and there are substantial disparities based on socio-economic status, geography and gender (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2024). On other side, Education plays an important role in the development and prosperity of any society (Khan et al., 2022).

In developing countries, children usually combine labor activities besides their school attendance (Admassie, 2003). Child labor is a major reason for non-participation of children in school (Dunne et al, 2023) and it reduces educational achievement of the children (Amedu & Ossai, 2023; Eze et al., 2024).

In Pakistan, usually, low-income families enroll their children in public schools, which offer free education but often encounter numerous issues (ADB, 2019). Furthermore, students attending these schools frequently face challenges related to poverty, abuse, parental unwillingness, long commutes, poor education quality, unfavorable school conditions, overcrowded classrooms, and careless behavior of the teachers (Latif et al., 2015).

School dropout can be attributed to a range of socio-economic reasons, therefore, labor activities of the children is one of the key factor for absenteeism, poor academic performance, and eventual dropout. As Rathod & Koli (2015) explains that many parents have more children to increase family income, but poverty often forces these children to leave school and seek employment to help support their families. Several other factors contributing to child labor beyond poverty and illiteracy, includes migration, low economic growth, deep social biases against girls, large family sizes, corporal punishment in schools, lack of social security, low investment in social development by countries with low GDP, and weak enforcement of laws and regulations (Iravani, 2011). Additionally, many employers hire children on job because they accept lower wages, they do not demand overtime pay, they can be easily dismissed and there is no risk of them forming strikes or unions (Iravani, 2011).

Addressing child labor is pivotal in curbing the alarming rates of school dropout, ensuring that every child has the chance to pursue his/her education and escape himself from the vicious cycle of labor-induced deprivation. So, early prevention and prediction of risk factors of school dropout can help in reducing the dropout rate (Dinh-Thanh et al., 2021).

The discipline of School Social Work (SSW) is growing globally, with specialists in more than 50 countries (Huxtable, 2022). SSW was emerged in 19th and 20th century, as an integral part of the universal education movement in various countries (Huxtable, 2022). The initial duties of attendance officers were shifted into the role of SSW. Although school work still prioritize reducing absenteeism, but it has developed to address diverse national objectives and societal needs (Huxtable, 2022). In nations where there is widespread poverty, and child labor hinders school enrollment; SSW perform an essential role in supporting Education for All objectives through addressing basic needs like school meals, and confirming school attendance (Huxtable, 2022; Huxtable, 2013). In those nations where education is free and mandatory, various issues within the schools necessitate for the expertise of social workers (Huxtable, 2022; Huxtable, 2013).

School social workers provide Counselling, visit homes, and advocate for students (National Association of Social Workers, 2024). Social workers hired by school boards collaborate with families, students, school staff, and communities to enhance students' learning, achievement, and well-being. They recognize the various factors affecting student's life and behavior, and they assist students in achieving academic success and social adjustment (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2024). While bridging between

teachers and parents, school social workers are also involved in finding resources to support school capacities and mobilizing communities, to solve students' socio-economic issues, writing grants and to educate communities (Openshaw, 2008).

Rational of this study is to unveil the labour activities of public school children with a qualitative and quantitative perspective. SSW projects in many countries around the world are playing an important role in solving the problems of school children which also provides the rationale of this study and motivation to initiate it in Pakistan as well. Significance of the study is twofold. At first, it is an attempt to address the challenges confronted by children due to labour which can result in school dropout and secondly, this study would be an addition in social work theoretical knowledge to initiate SSW in Pakistan. Findings and recommendations of this study will further contribute for policy and program development.

2. Research Objectives

Following were the research objectives of the study;

1. To identify the prevalence of labour activities among public school children.
2. To analyse the association between labour factor with the chance/risk of school dropout.
3. To assess the prospects of school social workers in public schools for facilitating the school children.

3. Research Questions

The research questions of the study were;

1. Do the public school children involve in labour activities?
2. Is there any association between labour activities and chance/risk of school dropout?
3. What are the prospects of school social workers in public schools for facilitating the school children?

4. Literature Review

Child labour prevents children to gain essential skills necessary for their developmental potential (Amedu & Ossai, 2023). It poses a significant hindrance in achieving educational objectives in countries with low income (Amedu & Ossai, 2023). Many researches were found regarding child labour among school children. Few are mentioned in this section. A survey in Ogun State, Nigeria, involving 1675 students aged 5 to 18 years in public schools, aimed to determine the occurrence of child labor among school children. Disturbingly, the study revealed an overall prevalence of child labor at 64.5 percent (Fetuga et al., 2005). Another study conducted in Zimbabwe highlighted that girls' academic achievements are influenced by responsibilities such as household chores, engaging in child labor and facing financial limitations (Chinyoka, 2013).

How the households make choices regarding their children's involvement in labour and education, depicts in a research conducted in Bangladesh where parents' education considerably increases the prospect of a child focusing on their studies. Additionally, if father engages in vulnerable occupations like day-labor or wage-labor, it increases the chances of a child working full-time or combining work with study. Findings also underscore that child labor has negative influence on child's education, leading to reduced school attendance and lower academic achievement (Khanam, 2005).

Labour activities effect attendance and academic success of the school children. A

research looked into how child labor impacts academic performance and attendance of school students in Lagos State, Nigeria, revealed that exposure to child labor significantly affected academic performance, school attendance and study habits of the students. Moreover, there was noticeable difference in educational performance between students involved in child labor and those who were not (Oni, 2018). Another study in Bangladesh, reported that school grades and attendance are poorer in those children who are working (Khanam & Ross, 2011). Furthermore, child labor significantly contributes to the occurrence of school dropouts (Amedu & Ossai, 2023; Xayavong & Pholphirul, 2018).

Children can start labour due to lack of interest in education as well. Based on the information collected from 300 child laborers in Pune city, the causes of child labour were found as inadequate school performance, parental disinterest, lack of enthusiasm for education, and insufficient school facilities (Rathod & Koli, 2015). A study conducted in Mohmand, FATA (a tribal district), Pakistan, and it was revealed that school children prefer combining work with their education. The study also highlighted that with the increase in child's age, the possibility of their involvement in labor activities also increases (Khan et al., 2021). In a recent qualitative study conducted in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, parents reported that they produce their offspring for labouring and they are not interested in their schooling (Saleem et al., 2022).

Previous researches specifies that school social workers perform a significant role in addressing child labor issues by providing support to vulnerable students and families. As research conducted in Delhi, India, highlighted the active involvement of school social workers in resolving various student maladjustments. These issues ranged from academic difficulties to behavioral problems such as absenteeism, bullying, lack of attention, aggression, stealing, shyness, peer issues, and school dropouts (Anand, 2010). Additionally, social workers addressed various emotional and psycho-social issues and provided support by distributing uniforms and stationery to the students from poor backgrounds (Anand, 2010). Students further expressed a greater willingness to approach social workers to resolve both personal and academic concerns (Anand, 2010). They emphasized the importance of having someone within the school whom they could confide in, as there were issues they felt uncomfortable discussing with parents, teachers, or friends (Anand, 2010).

Researches regarding the impact of school social work services can be traced in the literature. In a study conducted in Midwestern school districts, United States, researchers compared 74 students who were receiving the service of SSW with 71 students who were not receiving these services. The findings revealed that the practice of SSW significantly reduced various risk factors associated with student absenteeism (Newsome et al., 2008). Similarly, school social workers were interviewed in Minnesota, regarding the effects of SSW services; improved attendance was observed as noticeable outcomes (Bye et al., 2009). Battle-Winston (2019) reported that in Delaware District, United States, the social workers have achieved their goal of preventing dropout; and the graduation rate is significantly improved in the district. In Chille also, the dropout rate is decreased in the schools with the help of school social workers (López et al., 2021). Another research by Alvarez et al., (2013) proved that an increased school social workers in a region leads to higher number of high school graduates.

Based on the literature, it is established that reducing absenteeism and dropout is the main function of SSW. Moreover, Huxtable (2022) emphasized that in school social work, promoting school attendance is only one target, rather, it addresses issues ranging from food insecurity to psychosocial problems both in developed and underdeveloped countries, and their role is very important for helping children, schools and families.

5. Theoretical Framework

As conceptual framework, ecological perspective is the bases of SSW practice. This framework recognizes the environment as an influencing factor in a child's schooling (National Association of Social Workers, 2012). Therefore, ecological system theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) was applied as theoretical and conceptual framework in this research.

Ecological framework is applied in SSW from last many years which emphasis on the problems of child by seeing the variety of social activities which occur in micro, meso, exo and macro systems. Similarly, child labor is an integral part of the ecological system which significantly impact a child's schooling. This study tries to focus the school children and the labour activities as an ecological factor in the environment which compel him/her to dropout from the school. Because in ecological exploration, the characteristics of a person and the structure and processes taking place in his/her environment, must be observed as interdependent system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

6. Materials and Methods

This study is based on convergent parallel design (Creswell et al., 2011) of mixed method approach for its methodology. Proportional stratified random sampling technique was used for quantitative sampling. For this study, 53 female and 47 male students of grades 6 and 10 from the public schools of district Lahore, tehsil City, were selected. Inclusion criteria in this study was based on students having poor attendance and poor grades. Quantitative data was gathered from the students while parents, teachers and Monitoring & Evaluation Assistants (MEAs) of Programme Monitoring & Implementation Unit (PMIU) were interviewed for qualitative responses. Reliability and validity of research instruments were checked through SPSS and experts' opinion. Quantitative responses were analyzed descriptively through SPSS. To find out the relationship between labour activities and school dropout, binary logistic regression model was used. Qualitative responses were converted into thematic analysis. Finally, quantitative and qualitative analysis were combined together for complete interpretation.

7. Findings of the Study

Findings of qualitative and quantitative data are presented in this part. Details are given below:

i. Findings of Quantitative Data

Table 1
Socio-demographic Profile

Characteristics	Percentage
Grade	
6	37
10	63
Gender	
Male	47
Female	53
Father's education	
Uneducated	90

Educated	10
Mother's education	
Uneducated	92
Educated	8
Father's working status	
Not working	3
Working	97
Mother's working status	
Not working	47
Working	53
Future aspirations regarding education	
Not sure	41
Drop out	28
Finish high school	30
Finish College	1

Table 1 reveals socio-demographic profile of the students. 63% of the students were studying in 10th class and 37% were studying in 6th class. 53% of students were girls and 47% were boys. The large number of the mothers (92%) and the fathers (90%) were illiterate. Majority of the fathers (97%) and the mothers (53%) of the school children were employed with very low wages. Mostly mothers were working as housemaids. While on inquiring the students about completing their education, mostly (41%) were not sure about completion of their education; and 28% confirmed for dropping out from school in the same year. 30% of the students said that they will finish the high school and only one student was hopeful to finish college.

Table 2

Students involved in any Job/Chores (Paid or Unpaid)

Types of job/chore	Percentages		Total
	Yes	No	
Labor outside home	38	62	100
Labor at home	10	90	100
Household chores	31	69	100
Care of younger siblings	25	75	100

In table 2, students provided multiple responses regarding the first objective of this study which was regarding the prevalence of labour activities among school children. 38% students said that they were working as labourer outside the homes. 10% told that they are involved in labour within their houses. Students 31% were found involved in household chores and take care of younger siblings with 31% and 25% respectively, majority in families with single parents and working mothers.

Table 3

Binary Logistic Regression Model of Association of Students' Job/Chores Factor with the Chance/Risk of School Dropout (Multivariate Analysis)

Characteristics	School dropout	
	Odds Ratio	95% CI
Students do any job / chores		
No	Ref.	
Yes	1.83	0.17-4.06

Table 3 determines the effect of labour activities on dropout status confirmed by the students which was the second objective/question of this study. The model of Binary Logistic Regression was used with dropouts from school, due to the dichotomous nature (non-dropout, dropout) of dependent variable. The chances of dropping out of students from school is increased who are involved in any type of job such as 1.83 times higher odds, which means that students involved in labour had 1.83 times increased chances of school dropout as compared to other students.

ii. Findings of Qualitative Data

This section unveils the opinions of teachers and parents of the students who were having poor attendance and poor grades. Following themes were emerged from the interviews:

Theme 1: Child Labour: Teachers confirmed that majority of public school students are involved in labor activities. "These parents are moved to Lahore to earn money, due to this reason their children are involved in labor and attend school with short attendance" (T2, interview 11 June 2021; T1, interview 7 June 2021). "Usually, they are poor and live in slums nearby city (T1, interview 7 June 2021). "Children belonged to single parents are mostly found in labor" (T5, interview 23 June 2021).

Theme 2: Work Categories: "Boys mostly work as paid labourers outside homes whereas girls are involved in household chores and work as domestic labourer" (T1, interview 7 June 2021). "Some of the girls go with their mothers for baby-sitting" (T6, interview 25 June 2021). Parents also established that poverty is the reason they involve their children in labour activities. One parent (P2, interview 16 June 2021) said that, "my son is working on a bread shop as well as vends face masks". An official shared the words of a teacher that, "I found my student begging in market; he ran away when I called him" (MEA, interview 16 July 2021).

Theme 3: Effect on School Performance: "Children cannot have adequate sleep because they work till late night; when they attend school next day they seem tired and unhappy; even they sleep in class" (T5, interview 23 June 2021).

Theme 4: Abuse at Workplaces: "Children face various other difficulties on workplaces i.e., harassment, torture and strict behavior" reported by a teacher (T5, interview 23 June 2021).

Theme 5: Disappointment regarding Schools: As parents also confirmed that their children combine work with school but one parent (P9, interview 05 July 2021) reported it with different viewpoint and told that, "children gain influence from others and consider that in public schools, the quality of education is not good, therefore, they become frustrated and start labouring side by side."

iii. Triangulation

Triangulation of qualitative and quantitative findings offers a broader understanding of pervasive child labor issue and its interconnectedness with education, socio-economic circumstances, and future aspirations of children regarding education.

Quantitatively, the statistics reveal a staggering correlation between parental education levels, low aspirations regarding future education, and children's engagement in jobs. Notably, the quantitative data also underscores the increased likelihood of school dropout for children engaged in any form of labor, presenting a substantial 1.83 times higher odds of dropout, emphasizing the detrimental impact of labor on educational continuity.

Qualitatively, the themes converge with quantitative findings, which provide deeper understanding of socio-economic perspective that pushes children towards child labor. Teachers, parents and monitoring representative confirm the incidence of child labor among public school children with different types of jobs for example selling face masks, working on bread baking shops, babysitting and even involving in begging. Mostly boys were found engage in paid labor while girls were participating in household chores and domestic labour or accompany their mothers for babysitting.

Qualitative data highlights the reasons behind child labor, explaining how poverty forces parents to send children to work, affecting their school performance and attendance. Moreover, the qualitative data underlines the more vulnerability of single parents' children. The challenges which children face due to labour, such as inadequate sleep, fatigue, poor attendance, and poor results reflect the quantitative association between labor and increased likelihood of school dropout. Qualitative responses explain that children face further challenges on their workplaces.

The convergence of both findings depicts a broader overview, which highlights the prevalence of child labor and its harmful impacts on school children. Triangulation of these results strengthens the understanding regarding this issue and stresses urgent need for interventions to address this issue.

8. Discussion

Literature explains that child's learning is dependent on several factors existing in his/her ecological environment. This study concludes that, students of public schools who stay frequently absent and do not achieve well in studies have microsystem challenge of labour activities, which was never diagnosed and treated. Family and school both are the primary components of microsystem; poverty within the family and academic failure in school due to demanding nature of labour activities leads to school dropout.

Based on the first objective of this study, the results of quantitative and qualitative data emphasized the complex relationship between household poverty, harsh realities of labor and children's future aspirations regarding education. The opinions of teachers and parents confirmed the challenges faced by public school children. This study results are aligned with the previous researches mentioned in the literature review section (Chinyoka, 2013; Fetuga et al., 2005). Need to supplement family income leaves little energy and time for education. All these problems disturbs their learning, affecting their ability to maintain attendance and educational progress. As a result, these children often struggle to meet academic standards, leading to lower grades or failure in examinations, similarly reported by Oni (2018) in a previous study. Without adequate schooling, these children might lack the necessary skills and knowledge for future employment opportunities, perpetuating a cycle of poverty.

Due to all of these circumstances and sufferings, students were found at the risk of dropout. In literature also, jobs and household chores were found as causes of school dropout (Alaoui et al., 2021; Xayavong & Pholphirul, 2018). Students' motivation regarding education is necessary for academic success (Waheed et al., 2022) but in this study, aspirations regarding education were found low. Teachers stated that due to poverty, parents involve their children in labour activities, therefore, one parent asserted that quality of education in public schools is not up to the mark that's why children become dissatisfied and start labouring. Either way, the chances of school dropout was found increased (1.83 times higher odds) in this study for those children who were involved in any kind of job; as a response of second objective/question. This finding is supported by the previous study mentioned earlier which explains that child labor significantly contributes to the occurrence of school dropouts (Amedu & Ossai, 2023).

In other countries, where SSW is currently practicing, this service tries to create school environment more appropriate to the students' needs (Allen-Meares, 2013; Huxtable, 2022; UNICEF, 2022). School social workers were employed initially to address attendance related problems and in several countries they were titled as truancy specialist and attendance workers (Huxtable, 2022). School social workers perform important role in identifying at-risk students, providing them with necessary support services, and coordinating with families and communities to mitigate the factors leading to school dropout. So, the findings of third objective/question of this study concludes that the necessity of school social workers in solving the issue of child labor among school children cannot be ignored.

In future research, the sample population can be included from some schools of rural districts. The factors responsible for child labour can be studied more extensively in quantitative part and those factors can be further relate with the role of school social work.

9. Conclusion

The present study concludes that students in public schools in Pakistan are involved in child labour (paid or unpaid) which has detrimental effects on their academic performance and school attendance, and consequently they are at the risk of dropping out. This issue has been largely unaddressed and untreated. Teachers often lack time and resources to tackle this problem. The earlier discussion highlights that school social workers possess the expertise to address issues related to poverty, child labour, absenteeism, academic underperformance, and dropout. Therefore, based on the study findings and existing literature, this specific study has practical application for policy development and to introduce a school based intervention of school social work which can effectively resolve the issue of child labour among public school children.

10. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, Education policy and School Education Department should recognize the challenges faced by many students. There is need to introduce the field of School Social Work (SSW) as policy intervention, in order to help such students and their families in tackling these challenges. SSW may be inducted by Social Welfare Department (SWD), on same model as SWD provides Medical Social Services in the Health Department. The subject of SSW should be mandated as a core course within the BS Social Work curriculum at university level. Poverty as main reason of child labour and dropout, SSWs, potentially being employees of Department of Social Welfare, may connect school performance and attendance with social protection benefits. Further, school social workers may apply for financial grants for supporting poor children of public schools.

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