



# FOSTERAGE AND EDUCATIONAL ACCESS AMONG THE DAGOMBA OF SAVELUGU-NANTON, GHANA

CREATE GHANA POLICY BRIEF 4

SEPTEMBER 2010



## FOSTERAGE AND EDUCATIONAL ACCESS AMONG THE DAGOMBA OF SAVELUGU-NANTON, GHANA

A significant minority of children in Ghana, in common with other countries in West Africa, are cared for primarily by guardians other than their biological parents under arrangements of fosterage. While in some cases these arrangements provide for better educational opportunities than would be available in the biological home, in many others fostered children are at a notable disadvantage where educational access is concerned. This policy brief explores the implications of fosterage for educational access in the case of one deprived rural district in Ghana where traditions of fosterage are strong and where levels of access to education are comparatively low. It is based on the CREATE Pathways to Access Research Monograph, *Fosterage and Access to Schooling in Savelugu-Nanton, Ghana* (Rolleston, forthcoming).

### Background

Fosterage is common in many parts of Africa, such as the Northern Region of Ghana and especially among the Dagomba ethnic group. The Savelugu-Nanton district has the highest proportion of Dagomba of any district in Ghana.

Savelugu Nanton is also considered one of the most educationally deprived districts and is described by a number of other indicators of deprivation including the country's highest under-5 mortality rate (GSS, 2005).

CREATE's Community and Schools Survey (ComSS) tracked 1,630 children in the district over a period of three years beginning in 2007. In the course of the study, the issue of fosterage emerged as a significant access barrier, albeit a complex, contingent and multi-dimensional one.

This policy brief draws upon findings from the ComSS study and from interviews with education professionals and household caregivers. National-level context is provided by use of data from the Ghana Living Standards Survey (Round Five) conducted in 2005/6. It examines the effects of practices of fosterage among the Dagomba on

access to education and makes some recommendations for research and policy.

### The effects of fosterage on education: Findings from survey data

A modelling exercise using GLSS 5 data was undertaken to examine the prevalence of fosterage and the differences in 'access chances' for fostered children compared to biological children across all regions in Ghana.

It found that fostered children in the form of relatives other than biological children and grandchildren of the household head constitute around 10% of all children nationally and in the Northern Region and that fostered children are significantly less likely to have ever attended school in the presence of controls for household expenditure and other key factors, including adult education, in four regions of Ghana.

**In the Northern Region, a fostered child has a chance of ever attending school 19% lower than a biological son or daughter, other things being equal. This effect is**

approximately twice as large as the effect of a child being male as opposed to female, in a region where gender disparities in education are the largest in the country.

While the prevalence of fosterage was found to be higher for girls, the negative effect on ever-attendance at school was found to be higher for boys. Taking the effects of gender and fosterage together, fostered boys and girls were found to have almost equal initial access chances.

ComSS data provide more details for the Savelugu-Nanton district sample. They show that fosterage is almost twice as prevalent (at 18.7% of all children) in the district sample when compared to the Northern Region generally. The prevalence of fosterage was found to be higher for girls, at 22.6%, compared to 15.7% for boys. The data show that fostered children in the sample are typically more over-age for their grade if they are boys, and more likely to drop-out of school if they are girls.

Nevertheless, some families in rural areas elect to foster their children to relatives elsewhere in order to enhance their children's access to education; so that the implications of fosterage for education are contingent upon both the reasons for fosterage and upon family circumstances.

Pilon (2003) summarises the contingency of the effects of fosterage in the West African context; stressing the importance of the nature of the relationship between the family of origin and the host family. Crucial questions include:

- Who pays for the children's tuition fees, supplies, clothes, food etc.?
- What is the extent of the guardian's responsibility towards the child?
- What is the relationship like?
- What is the foster child's place in the host family?

He also argues that in general, the lower the family of origin's involvement, the higher the risk that the foster child will suffer mistreatment in the host family (Pilon, 2003:19).

Examination of the effects of fosterage on access to education is complicated by the fact that fosterage is practiced more often in rural areas, where adherence to Dagbon customs may be stronger; but also where issues of poverty, the affordability of schooling and the need for child labour are more pressing.

### Education in Savelugu-Nanton District

Savelugu-Nanton District has been associated with low levels of educational access since colonial times, for a number of reasons:

- Poor education infrastructure.
- High levels of poverty, mortality and fertility.
- Low adult education levels by comparison with the rest of Ghana.

Only around 3% of primary caregivers in the district could read in 2004 (UNICEF, 2005). The Net Enrolment Rate (NER) in primary school was 49% in 2003/4, but had increased dramatically to 78% by 2009/9. (MoESS, EMIS data).

Other explanations of low educational access levels may be linked to aspects of Dagbon culture including:

- A labour-intensive system of agriculture.
- A developed indigenous system of vocational training.
- The high status accorded to Koranic learning.

### Why do the Dagomba practice fosterage?

Opong (1973) identified a number of 'functions' of fosterage among the Dagomba:

- Fosterage knits the family together more closely - children get to know their relatives.
- It involves childcare by experienced and mature relatives, rather than inexperienced parents
- It spreads wealth through the family.
- The services of a foster child are valuable to the fostering family in terms of performing tasks in the compound (for girls) or caring for livestock and running errands (for boys) (Opong, 1973)

While no direct links may be drawn from these functions of fosterage to educational effects, it may be suggested that expectations of children's work in some cases come into conflict with full-time schooling and may exert a negative influence on educational access.

The Dagomba indigenous training system encouraged fosterage, particularly for boys who were, and in some cases continue to be, sent to live with grandfathers or uncles to 'learn a trade'. Boys are also fostered to relatives in part to contribute to farm labour, while girls may be fostered to assist relatives, most often their aunts, in domestic work.

Along with benefitting from foster children's work, foster parents also play an important role in preparing girls for marriage. Abukari argues that:

*"Adequate training and preparation for proper marriage is the only obligation that a foster parent has to perform in respect of a fostered girl. Even in modern times, education plays second fiddle to the concept of proper marriage"* (Abukari, 2008)

However, most children in Dagbon are engaged in work and many, including fostered children, combine this with successful schooling. The impact of work and of the need to acquire certain assets required for marriage on fostered children's and indeed all children's education is likely to be mediated by household poverty, among other factors. For fostered children, conceptions of their role in the host family as well as of the distribution of responsibilities between foster and biological parents are also key.

Interviews with education professionals and caregivers confirmed that fosterage is motivated by wider relations and obligations of kinship and by a conception of child-rearing responsibilities which extends beyond the nuclear family.

In common with other ethnic groups, fosterage also occurs in order to alleviate crises associated with parental mortality and serves to provide children for childless female relatives and care for older relatives.

### **The effects of fosterage of education: Findings from interview data**

In interviews, caregivers made it clear that meeting educational costs was frequently a struggle for them. Many explained that they faced difficult choices in with their children's schooling:

*"We face a lot of problems. Sometimes we sell the little food we have to buy the children's school needs and when we are faced with starvation we sell the few sheep and goats that we rear and that's how we continue to exist."* (Interview with caregivers)

Moreover, where a family is unable to send all children to school, it may be foster children who are excluded. Education professionals tended to cast the implications of fosterage for education in a negative light:

*"Sometimes a child comes to school but they are slipping and the school asks why are you coming in late and the child says 'oh I am not staying with my*

*parents I am staying with my auntie or this and that and early in the morning before I come to school I have to do this, do this, do this or have to work late at night that's why I am always sleeping in school. So the school will know that the child is not actually with the parents but they don't have records for that."* (Interview with education professional)

Caregivers, however, more often emphasised the benefits of fostering, including in terms of education. For example:

*"There are advantages for fostering these children for us and for the children. We get the opportunity to send them to school so they can learn. Sometimes with their biological parents they are not able to go to school."* (Interview with caregiver)

Both sets of interviewees, nonetheless, agreed that some foster parents treat foster children unequally when compared to biological children. However, some foster parents cited a lack of support from biological parents as a major barrier in respect of providing for a foster child's education.

One education professional explained the approach taken in his own case:

*"When the girl was weaned after three or four years and she [his sister] came to take the child I told her, 'no, I want the girl to go to school. You don't live here, you live somewhere and if I give the girl to you she will become a liability'. But we are looking at the children as assets so that she will come and work for you, so if you want financial help, come to me and I will help you but this girl I want her to go to school and I want to keep her here."*

While not generalisable, the example illustrates the point that to some extent at least, the disadvantage suffered by fostered children may be alleviated through co-operation between foster and biological parents.

Interview findings suggest that while some cases of fosterage are educationally beneficial to the fostered child, in many, kinship obligations are the main reason for the foster arrangement and these may result in a considerable burden on already poor families in respect of additional educational expenses.

### **Implications for further research**

Fosterage is complex and its effects on educational access contingent. Further work is required to

understand better the educational decision-making of parents and guardians, especially those and constrained by extreme poverty in the context of rural Dagbon.

It is clear is that educational expenses constitute a major barrier to access but that in addition girls, over-age children and fostered children often suffer most when resources are scarce.

Further research could unpick the complex links between fosterage and educational access barriers resulting from poverty. Research could also examine in detail the nature of work responsibilities among fostered children and their impact on education.

Examining the household economy in relation to work, food-security, education and time-use of fostered and biological children in families in districts like Savelugu-Nanton district might help to reveal the nexus of relationships between fosterage and education in more detail.

#### **Implications for policy**

Interventions intended to benefit fostered children directly should recognise that the disadvantage suffered by fostered children results not from fosterage *per se* but from the multiple-disadvantage which some fostered children experience.

Further cost-reduction is perhaps the most obvious intervention which would benefit children in poor households and especially fostered children. The provision of free uniforms has already been initiated by the district. Further measures might support the provision of school materials. Further, 'school feeding' was a measure many head teachers noted as successful at improving enrolment among the poor.

Measures aimed at improving timely enrolment such as pre-school provision have the potential to benefit fostered children disproportionately. The same may be true for measures aimed at reducing drop-out among girls. Moreover, the two are intimately linked. An over-age girl may drop-out because she reaches a marriageable age, but in the case of a fostered girl the pressure to drop-out may be greater owing to the more pressing need for money to gather the required assets in the absence of support from her biological home.

Flexible schooling alternatives which take account of children's work and seasonal patterns of agriculture may also benefit fostered children. The

School for Life NGO programme achieved notable success during its operation in the district on this basis, particularly concerning the education of fostered girls. The programme focused on teaching vocational skills but also enabled the re-enrolment of a number of early school 'drop-outs'.

Policy makers should also consider the issue of how best to promote the sharing of responsibilities for meeting educational expenses between biological and foster parents. This is clearly a complex and sensitive issue. Advocacy work and/or sensitisation in the area of the children's right to children and in relation to combining positive aspects of fosterage, children's work and schooling might also help raise awareness among biological and foster parents regarding ways of supporting their children's access to education.

#### **Selected References**

- Abukari (2008) Unpublished Master's Thesis. University of Education, Winneba.  
Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) (2005) 2000 Population and Housing Census: Northern Region: Analysis of District Data and Implications for Planning. Accra: GSS  
Pilon (2003) Foster Care and Schooling in West Africa: The State of Knowledge. Background Paper for the UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report 2003. Paris: UNESCO  
Oppong (1973) Growing Up in Dagbon. Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation.

#### **This policy brief is based on:**

Rolleston, M. C. (Forthcoming) Fosterage and Access to Schooling in Savelugu-Nanton, Ghana. CREATE Pathways to Access Research Monograph.

It has been developed by the author and the CREATE team.



**CREATE** is a DFID-funded research programme consortia exploring issues of educational access, transitions and equity in South Africa, India, Bangladesh and Ghana. For more information go to: [www.create-rpc.org](http://www.create-rpc.org)