

Full Length Research Paper

Surviving child labour through forgiveness and self-efficacy: Implications for counselling practice

Nyuiemedi Agordzo Edoh-Torgah^{1,2*} and Richardson Addai-Mununkum^{1,2}

¹Department of Counselling Psychology, Faculty of Applied Behavioural Sciences in Education, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana.

²Department of Educational Foundations, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana.

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Self-efficacy and forgiveness are personal resources that individuals utilize to navigate challenging tasks, find meaning in life, and achieve inner peace. This study aimed to deepen our understanding of how self-efficacy and forgiveness serve as coping strategies for survivors of traumatic experiences of child labor. We conducted a qualitative phenomenological study to explore the various dimensions of forgiveness and self-efficacy in relation to the endurance of child labor. Purposive and criterion-based sampling strategies were employed to recruit eleven participants aged 30 to 53, who had experienced child labor for three to fifteen years. An in-depth interview protocol was developed, addressing participants' experiences, incidents of child labor, challenges faced, and coping strategies employed. Thematic network analysis was utilized to develop thematic frameworks, organizing raw data into a coherent logical framework presented through a conceptual map. Data were triangulated with other sources, pseudonyms were used for participant protection, and validation was conducted through member checking. The analysis revealed that vicarious learning and self-belief were perceived as self-efficacy strategies, while understanding the roles of perpetrators and religiosity were identified as forgiving practices promoting survival and resiliency. The study's findings carry implications for counselors, religious leaders and NGOs.

Key words: Forgiveness, survival, self-efficacy, child labour, traumatic experiences, qualitative phenomenology.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of self-efficacy, as proposed by Bandura (1986), elucidates how individuals perceive their capabilities in dealing with challenging life tasks. A robust sense of self-efficacy is linked to the successful completion of significant tasks, the ability to learn through observation, belief in one's capacity to succeed, and a low level of anxiety. Those with high self-efficacy often

anticipate and achieve success, whereas individuals with low self-efficacy harbor doubts about their abilities, leading to diminished chances of success and lower self-esteem. Notably, students' success in school has been found to be partially dependent on their self-efficacy (Chemers et al., 2001).

Research suggests that forgiveness plays a pivotal role

*Corresponding author. E-mail: naedoh-torgah@uew.edu.gh.

in repairing relationships and restoring positive effects on an individual's meaning in life, particularly after experiencing interpersonal offenses (Van Tongeren et al., 2015). This underscores the idea that forgiveness in relationships fosters a positive outlook on life, enhancing the overall quality of individuals' lives as they engage with others.

Furthermore, there is a recognized correlation between forgiveness and self-efficacy in promoting overall well-being. While these concepts have been explored in the context of individuals facing adversity, a literature gap exists regarding the use of forgiveness and self-efficacy as coping strategies for surviving out-of-school experiences that hinder academic success. According to Lazarus (1966) and Lazarus and Folkman (1987), stressors are central to everyday life, and individuals appraise themselves and their conditions to determine the perceived threats and their capacity to cope.

Despite the potential offered by public education, global research suggests that counseling services for individuals with emotional needs are often inadequate in many public schools (Wagner et al., 2005). Although it is established that instructional and emotional support improves academic achievement for those with emotional disturbances (Hamre and Pianta, 2005), public education often falls short, particularly in resource-deprived contexts where issues like child labor and streetism prevail. This study aims to explore how self-efficacy and forgiveness operate as coping strategies for surviving traumatic experiences of child labor. Such insights are crucial for drawing attention to and proposing adaptations to school curricula, especially in the realm of school counseling, to better support individuals with traumatized childhood experiences.

THEORY

This study draws on the works of Bandura (1997) and Enright and North (1998), focusing on the concepts of self-efficacy and forgiveness, respectively, to theoretically shape its framework. Self-efficacy, according to Bandura (1986, 1997), refers to individuals' belief in their ability to exhibit and carry out behaviors necessary to achieve specific performance goals. It signifies confidence in controlling one's motivation, behavior, and social environment. Self-evaluations of these cognitive conditions influence various aspects of human experience, including goal striving, energy expenditure, and the likelihood of achieving specific levels of behavioral performance (Benight and Bandura, 2004). Unlike traditional psychological constructs, self-efficacy beliefs are hypothesized to change depending on the area of functioning and circumstances surrounding behavior occurrence (Scholz et al., 2002).

Bandura (1997) identifies four major sources of self-efficacy: mastery/past experiences (past successes

creating high expectations), vicarious experiences (observing similar others succeed in tasks), verbal persuasion (the impact of encouragement or praise from significant others on performance expectations), and lowering emotional arousal (the association between fatigue or tiredness and a perceived lack of capacity to perform). Traumatic experiences of child labor among young people can be likened to the experiences of children and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic, with its attendant trauma and ripple effects on overall life functioning. The psychological impact of school closures, lockdowns, loss of family and friends, and stigma and discrimination associated with COVID-19 may have devastating effects on the psychological development of young people.

Children or individuals who have survived the traumas of child labor are likely to navigate the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic due to the resilience built from past experiences. Young people may develop strong coping mechanisms by learning from individuals who have survived child labor, believing that if others have survived life-threatening situations, they too can endure the pandemic and continue to function well. Whether its child trafficking, war, or COVID-19, there are resemblances to the trauma associated with child labor, involving the loss of loved ones, identity loss, gaps in child development, or child development deficits, and separation (Masiero et al., 2020). All these contexts could result in trauma, and children and young people may learn to move forward by forgiving their perpetrators or systemic failures and relying on their self-efficacious prowess for survival and thriving.

There are numerous definitions for the concept of forgiveness, but scholars generally agree on a few key points. Primarily, forgiveness is defined as a reduction in negative feelings, thoughts, and behaviors towards a transgressor—a shift from negative to neutral or negative to positive feelings. It also involves an increase in positive emotions following interpersonal guilt towards a transgressor, and one cannot forgive unless unforgiveness has occurred, although there are various ways to reduce unforgiveness, with forgiveness being just one of them (Rye and Pargament, 2002; Worthington et al., 2007). The concept of forgiveness is seen as a process of making peace with oneself and others for a better life. It reflects the responses individuals make to be at peace by freeing themselves from negative associations with the self, others, and circumstances that have wronged them (Thompson et al., 2005), eventually fostering benevolence in those who have been wronged (McCullough et al., 2000).

Numerous studies have shown that forgiveness yields positive outcomes, promoting physiological and psychological advancements, increasing high self-esteem, positive parenting styles, reducing anxiety, and enhancing self-efficacy (Al-Mabuk et al., 1995; Kanbara et al., 2008; Newberg et al., 2000; Scholz et al., 2002).

However, Soudi et al. (2015) reported that while self-esteem is significantly correlated with forgiveness of situations, it is not as strongly linked to self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others. Forgiveness is both a personal and social process, involving the decision to let go of an offense, grudge, or hurt and forgive a transgressor. This decision can be influenced by situational factors, such as whether an apology was offered (Darby and Schlenker, 1982; Exline and Baumeister, 2000), as well as dispositional factors, like a tendency to be forgiving (Brown, 2003; Emmons, 2000) or not vengeful (Stuckless and Goranson, 1992).

Genuine forgiveness involves feelings of compassion, benevolence, and love for the transgressor and a complete relinquishing of the right to retaliate, harbor resentment, or remain indifferent. When forgiveness embodies these features, it becomes a coping strategy that individuals use to overcome trauma or conflicts. Individuals whose lives have been disrupted by experiences that brought trauma to their developmental stages often feel offended and may hold grudges against their offenders or transgressors. Traumatic events, such as child labor, can cause physical, emotional, spiritual, or psychological harm to victims. These individuals might experience distressing moments, feeling threatened, anxious, or frightened as a result of their child labor experiences or general loss. In some cases, they may not know how to respond due to their vulnerabilities, or may be in denial about the effect such an experience has had on them in childhood.

Inspired by these theories, the following questions were formulated to guide our study of adult survivors of child labour:

1. What are the indicators of forgiveness?
2. What are the indicators of self-efficacy?
3. How do self-efficacy and forgiveness promote survival?

METHODS

This study used a qualitative interpretivist paradigm to explore various facets of forgiveness and self-efficacy through understanding the experiences of adults who have survived child labour (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Morrow and Smith, 2012). We undertook a phenomenological study which emphasizes individuals' experiences as critical in understanding the processes and meanings that they attach to their life events (Creswell, 1998). This perspective provides a perfect paradigmatic understanding of 'lived' experiences of adults who have lived and experienced child labour with its attendance trauma. This approach allows participants to illuminate on their own experiences and the meanings they attached to it.

Purposive and criterion-based sampling strategies were employed to recruit participants. Firstly, purposively, we ensured that each participant recruited is uniquely positioned to answer the interview questions that would contribute to evolving theoretical propositions (Creswell, 1998). Secondly, the primary inclusion criteria were: (a) that respondents had worked as child labourers, and (b) pass a six-item screening questionnaire (Agordzo, 2011, Appendix A). In all, eleven adults comprising 10 males and one

female with ages from 30 to 53 years participated in this study. The decision to halt sampling was informed by the data reaching a point of saturation as the 9th, 10th and 11th participants did not seem to be narrating any information to promote new trends of themes.

The eleven participants were all adults who lived in the Central Region of Ghana at the time of this study. These were individuals who had responded positively to one or more items on the inclusion criteria (Agordzo, 2011) indicating their earlier experience in child labour as growing up children.

Ghana has one of the highest rates of child labor per country in the world, with about 21% of the childhood population participating in some form of child labor (Ortiz-Ospina and Roser, 2021). Central Region was purposively selected based on Government of Ghana and UNICEF's (2015) report that the region has typical child labour communities in Ghana with 12.8% children aged 5–17 involved in an economic activity and other child protection concerns such as 25.9% of children living away from their parents and 8.1% of adults living away from their children. We, therefore, assumed that the Central Region has incidence of adult survivors of child labour who would be open and willing to respond to and discuss their traumatic childhood experiences regarding child labour and how they coped.

Data instrument

An in-depth interview protocol was developed and used to generate data from participants who shared their experiences. The interview schedule included questions on participants' experiences, incidents of child labour, challenges and coping strategies used. The interviews which lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour were audio-recorded then transcribed.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic network analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Data transcription took place immediately after each interview. Manual coding was done beginning with the open coding to open data for identifying and labelling emerging themes. This was followed by axial coding that developed categorisation of both a priori and in vivo themes. Other researchers served as research assessors who coded each data independently in order to arrive at inter-rater reliability of the data. Based on theory and the research questions of the study, thematic frameworks were developed, and then raw data were indexed in a coherent logical framework using the conceptual map with the emerging themes on similarities and differences from the data. Data were also triangulated with other sources to establish credibility (Miles and Huberman, 1994). For ethical considerations, confidentiality of participants was protected by using pseudonyms in this presentation. Participants were treated with complete acceptance and positive regard (Agordzo, 2011) and also presented with a summary of their narratives (Enright and North, 1998; Lincoln and Guba, 1985) to facilitate participant validation.

Methodological integrity

The data of this article is part of a larger data collected for a Ph. D thesis of which the School of Graduate Studies of the University of Education, Winneba, the degree awarding institution, gave approval. To improve on methodological integrity, prolonged engagement with research participants of over 6 months helped collect in-depth data from adults who had worked as children in both fishing and farming communities to provide varied perspectives on their experiences and coping. Each participant signed a consent form and was provided with the transcribed data to confirm or otherwise their narratives captured in the data.

Participant validation also helped achieved credibility for the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In line with the research questions, the main findings are presented in figures. Generally, participants' traumatic experiences came from two groups of people: those who pushed them into child labour, and those who maltreated them during their child labour days. Sometimes perpetrators or transgressors serve same by being both those who pushed the participants into child labour and at the same time maltreat them. First, we present the data on forgiveness as indicators of coping, then self-efficacy and coping with child labour and finally, how both variables combine in promoting survival in the context of child labour. Figures 1 to 3 show answers to research questions 1 to 3 respectively.

Forgiveness indicators

Figure 1 shows that forgiveness was expressed through religion, understanding the role of perpetrators and not ruminating on the past.

Forgiveness and religion

Most of the participants described how necessary it was for them to forgive those who pushed them into child labour and those who maltreated them and made life unbearable for them. They indicated that their true healing would only occur when they forgive those who hurt them. Forgiveness, they explained, is letting go of offence and feeling light. They indicated that it taught them to be patient and not to seek revenge and this further helped them in lessening the threatening feelings that seemed to overwhelm them. The spirit of forgiveness gave them calmness and motivated them to look up to a higher power. When the question "Who do you forgive?" was asked during a FGD, Sparko said, "*I forgave all my masters [those who kept him in child labour] so I could move on in life*". His understanding of forgiveness demonstrates a clear connection between his decision to forgive, to survive and to thrive from the throes of trauma. Forgiveness thus purges an offended person's system and makes them feel light to move on. On the question, "Why do you forgive?" Austa said, "*I forgive because that is what I'm taught in church. And I want to go to heaven when I die*". Forgiveness here is a religious practice that links one with their creator or their supreme being. To forgive means to do the will of God. To forgive means to have a spiritual connection to God and be saved.

Not ruminating on the past

In their attempt to truly forgive others, participants found it

necessary to absolve themselves and others of any blame for their traumatic experiences. Forgiveness of perpetrators and self was a vital indicator of survival that promoted moving on because participants were able to be released from emotional pain and anger, to be happy, and to refrain from seeking revenge. Pepsi narrated, "*I don't blame my parents for what they put me through*" and Owner said, "*I thank my father if not for anything, for the education he has given us*". Forgiveness paved the way for participants to distance themselves, to move away and move on in life. Surviving is, therefore, strongly linked to participants' ability to forgive and not to dwell on the past and to keep the emotional pain from consuming them. However, two participants: Stado and Owner reported that during their child labour days, they attempted getting even with their abusers. Stado disclosed: "*But one thing that I did with my brother was when we were asked to take food to them [perpetrators] we either vomited or spat into the food and mixed it and take it to them* (Stado, FGD 1). They believed that their actions were punitive enough to their abusers. Though their abusers were not privy to this, they felt they have also punished them. However, these participants expressed remorse during group discussions about their past actions and wished they had never sought revenge by themselves knowing now fully well that God oversees the affairs of men.

Understanding the role of the perpetrators

Another coping strategy relating to forgiving behaviour is participants' understanding of the roles of perpetrators during their difficult child labour experiences. This strategy helped survivors to make meaning of their experiences, to forgive, and to move on. Austa retorted when she was asked about her grand auntie's reaction towards her departure from home as a domestic help that:

No! My auntie wasn't angry when I was taken to the boarding house. If I cast my mind back, I think she was happy when I was taken away... (Austa)

All participants reported that perpetrators, who were relatives, had their interest at heart but were forced by circumstances beyond their control to allow them to enter child labour. This understanding did not only help participants to forgive the perpetrators, but to also reintegrate to their families after child labour and this enhanced their survival and moving on (Enright and North, 1998). However, the findings did not reveal total relinquishing of the revenge since some survivors attempted punishing their perpetrators in their own way.

Perceived self-efficacy (PSE)

Establishing self-efficacy is a major coping strategy that

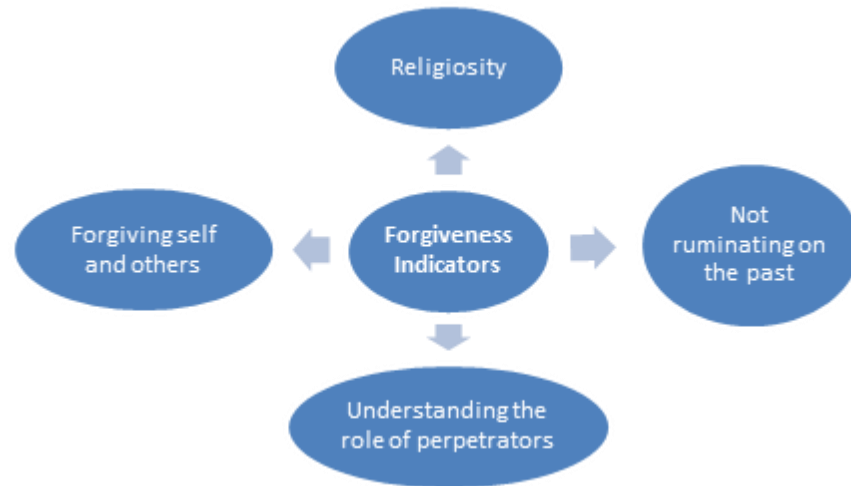


Figure 1. Thematic network on indicators of forgiving behaviours.

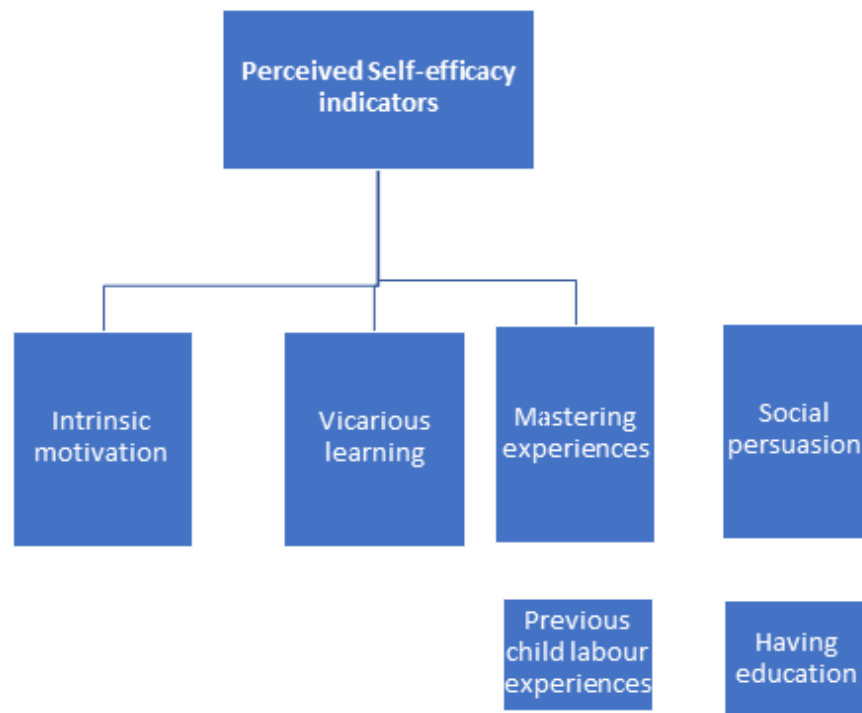


Figure 2. Thematic network on indicators of self-efficacy behavior.

helped survivors to cope with traumatic child labour experiences. Figure 2 reveals that to cope with and survive child labour, self-efficacy is expressed through intrinsic motivation, vicarious learning, verbal/social persuasion and mastery experiences (Bandura, 1997).

Employing intrinsic motivation to cope

One aspect of participants' perceived self-efficacy was

their ability to find strength from within themselves to cope. During an interview, Sparko disclosed that,

In those difficult times whenever I felt down in my spirit because of my condition, I lifted up myself by sometimes saying, "... [Sparko], get up and do something, this is not the end of you, you are a winner". With these assurances to myself, I felt I was on top of my situation...

Austa, among others found inner motivation as a strategy that was instrumental in their survival process. Closely linked with intrinsic motivation is participants' *belief in self*. Most participants commented that they have been able to cope and move on through difficult conditions because they believed in themselves. They intimated that they believed they could also become somebody in life just like other people and this knowledge kept them moving on. Austa declared: "*I knew I was promising*" and Jola stated that because he believed in his capabilities that he:

[I]took much interest in all those sporting events and I was doing them better... I introduced myself to the coach of Hearts of Oak and told him of what I can do and I was asked to join the team. After one week the coach was happy with me so he asked me to remain in the under 20 Junior Club ... (Jola)

The belief in self is a strong coping strategy because it gave participants strength and hope that it would be well with them too. It is this belief that sent and kept them in school to achieve their dreams. It was this belief that made them work long hours and to stay in school in spite of their difficult child labour activities. Though some community members did not believe that these participants would ever amount to anything in life, participants believed in themselves and resolved to prove this.

Vicarious learning

Sparko, Owner, Stado and others indicated that one other significant strategy they adopted to cope with child labour was learning from others or taking inspiration from what others were doing and how they were making it, and the realisation and knowledge that some people had been child labourers. This belief is summed up by Austa:

The friend who helped me to write my "O" Level introduced me to his sisters in the University. I saw that the girls were not older than me so I told myself that if these young girls have made it to the university, then I could also go to the university.

Participants vicariously learned from others and changed their mentality that helped in their coping and survival. The knowledge of others suffering or having suffered similar fate strengthens forgiveness of offenders/perpetrators thereby promoting peace with self and others and increasing self-efficacy that promotes successful task performance (Bandura, 1997; Ang et al., 2010).

Mastery experiences

Another indicator of self-efficacy is mastery experiences.

Participants reported that having gone through the kind of childhood trauma they experienced, they developed self-encouragement and belief in their capabilities through their previous experiences as means of forging ahead in times of challenges in life. Sacus poignantly captured this:

You know, we had seen suffering before so training challenges [as police recruit] could not break me. You know, at training you have to wake up early by 4.30 am and I had that in me already. You have to do your chores, and they were not new to me. While people were saying that I was good, I took it as normal because of what I went through as a child...

Participants have identified the source of their self-efficacy as something they have been built over the years through their period of child labour. They believed that they have the ability to do well in task performance and they attributed this to their enduring spirit nurtured through child labour. The inner-will has been tapped by the individual to respond to tasks that need to be performed. This drives away fear of competition and challenges. It makes the individual to see himself as an achiever and to move towards achieving that goal. The resilience built during the years of child labour pushed participants to endure difficult moments to acquire education. They struggled hard to put themselves in school and to remain in school in order to achieve their dreams of having education.

Verbal/social persuasion

Another form of self-efficacy found is the encouragement participants received from caring persons which strengthened them and enabled them to survive. Acts of encouragement and recognition of participants' worth can move them to act and to succeed. Some family members and friends encouraged participants to go to school or to stay in school to make it in life. This has given them hope and propelled them to move on and not to give up on life. This finding corroborates the work of (Kanbara et al., 2008) that emotional support, such as encouragement and empathy, positively influenced self-efficacy leading to active coping. Though many participants did not receive enough verbal persuasion, they believe the few that came to them were good enough to keep them on their toes.

Perceived self-efficacy and forgiveness as coping strategies

In response to research question 3, Figure 3 shows that individuals with traumatic experiences of child labour are able to survive when they use perceived self-efficacy and

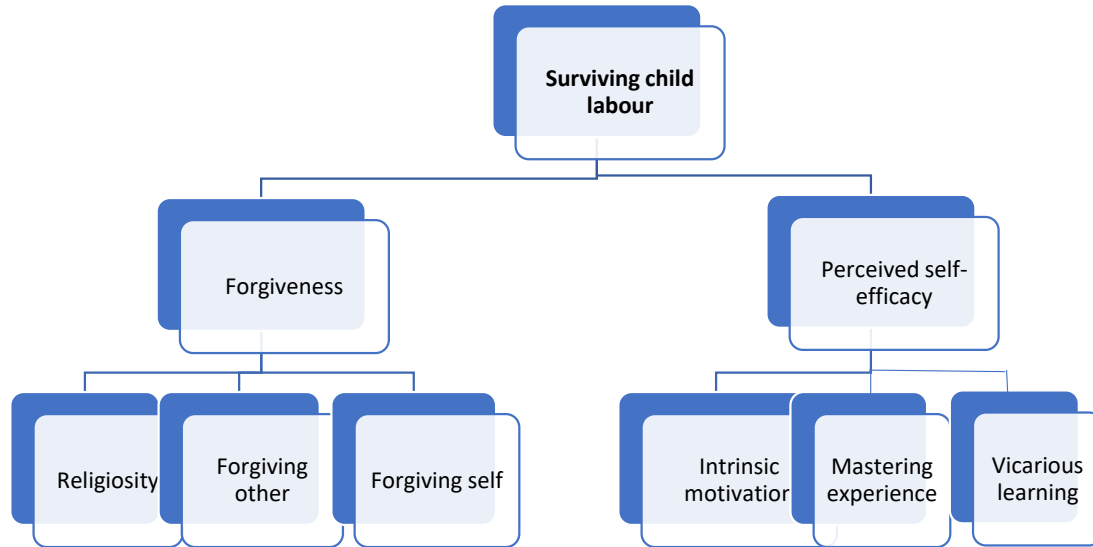


Figure 3. Thematic framework of surviving through forgiveness and self-efficacy.

forgiveness. People who have high self-efficacy characteristics such as intrinsic motivation and vicarious learning also practice forgiving behaviours such as religiosity and forgiving the self and other which promote coping and survival. Though this study's finding confirms (Al-Mabuk et al., 1995; Kanbara et al., 2008; Newberg et al., 2000; Scholz et al., 2002), it however, contradicts Soudi's et al., (2015) assertion that self-esteem does not significantly correlate with forgiveness of self and of others. Individuals with intrinsic motivation are strengthened by their past experiences of overcoming child labour and taking inspiration from others' successes to deepen their belief in their own abilities to overcome challenges which further result in their survival. The study found that intrinsic motivation, social persuasion, mastering experiences, vicarious learning are all sources of self-efficacy which aim at convincing and strengthening people's beliefs that they are capable of performing a task and succeeding (Bandura, 1984). Additionally, findings reveal that people who employ self-efficacy tend to practice forgiving behaviours that enhance their coping and survival of traumatic experiences.

Implications for counseling

These findings extend our knowledge on self-efficacy theory by corroborating verbal persuasion, mastering experiences, vicarious learning (Bandura, 1994) and introducing intrinsic motivation as important in strengthening people's beliefs that they are capable of performing a task and succeeding. Additionally, findings reveal that people who employ self-efficacy tend to practice forgiving behaviours that enhance their coping and survival of traumatic experiences. While we celebrate

the successes of these survivors, we are mindful of others who might not have survived the trauma of child labour. We therefore opine that school counsellors could do more for such students caught up in school and work with emotional needs to provide counselling opportunities for them to succeed while the formal, informal and hidden curricula are adapted to nurture the spirit of verbal persuasion, vicarious learning, mastering experiences and intrinsic motivation. Besides, the role of school counsellors in helping students cultivate forgiveness is very crucial not only to their individual wellbeing, but also to help these learners develop competencies that guarantee their success in school. This is particularly crucial for countries struggling with underdevelopment, necessitating children experiencing traumatic conditions of varied magnitudes. In contexts with predominance of child labour, orphans and hunger, schools could consciously open up their curricula to address this reality while strengthening counselling services to make schools more adept at meeting the psychological needs of students. Above all, in the context of recent global trauma experienced due to covid-19, assisting young people to tap into their self-efficacy and forgiving traits will not only benefit their development, but will help reduce the increasing mental health challenges brought in the wake of covid-19 pandemic. Understanding that some young people have survived the pandemic and are well functioning will provide the needed resource to other young people to take on that "I can survive it too" spirit.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Self-efficacy is conceptualized as the degree to which individuals perceive themselves as capable of dealing

with life's challenges, while forgiveness illustrates the process through which individuals make peace with life. This study reveals that survivors' past experiences have rendered them resilient and prepared to confront life's challenges. Vicarious knowledge of others' experiences has instilled an "I can also do that" spirit in them, while a belief in oneself serves as a robust coping strategy, providing strength and hope that one day things will improve for them. This belief motivated them to work long hours, stay in school, and achieve their dreams despite engaging in challenging child labor activities. Consequently, this study extends our understanding of self-efficacy theory by introducing intrinsic motivation as an additional source of self-efficacy, alongside highlighting social persuasion, mastery experiences, and vicarious learning.

Identified forgiveness indicators include religiosity, understanding the role of perpetrators, and refraining from ruminating on the past. When forgiveness embodies these features, it becomes a potent coping strategy employed by individuals to overcome trauma or conflicts. Forgiveness is a proactive and positive personal response to maltreatment or adversity. To forgive is to let go and reach a stage in life where the past no longer holds sway, and individuals are more concerned with present and future events. Those who utilize forgiveness as a coping mechanism tend to be more empathic, less ruminative, and less exploitative. The outcomes of self-efficacy and forgiveness, as perceived by participants, include resilience, an enhanced understanding of offenders, a belief in oneself, patience, and the ability to navigate difficulties.

The study's findings hold diverse implications for counsellors and mental health professionals. Particularly noteworthy is the discovery of intrinsic motivation as a vital contributor to individuals' ability to self-motivate and overcome challenging situations. The role of significant others in assisting child labourers in developing perceived self-efficacy, as revealed in the data, is a crucial finding with implications for parents and educators. This emphasizes the importance of children growing up with encouraging role models found in parents and significant figures such as teachers. Additionally, the theme of religiosity underscores the significant role forgiveness plays in both forgiving and believing in a higher power's providence. These findings could be applied to create a positive environment, especially for children during their critical formative period of personality development. Forgiveness promotes personal growth, offering numerous positive benefits such as enhancing self-belief and letting go of the past, which can be utilized to optimize functioning in individuals.

While this study successfully achieved its objectives by addressing the research questions, caution is warranted in interpreting the findings. The participants were not heterogeneous, and it is recommended to replicate a similar study with a more diverse and larger sample,

encompassing different traumatic experiences such as refugees and tortured individuals, while ensuring an even gender distribution. Additionally, a similar qualitative study involving participants' social resources as coping strategies aiding forgiveness and increased self-efficacy could be beneficial. This approach holds relevance in various mental health contexts, including war, natural disasters, and man-made disasters, extending beyond the trauma of child labor to encompass a resource applicable to diverse traumas in global emergencies (Masiero et al., 2020).

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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