

Negotiating Identities of Child Labour Survivors through Image and Forum Theatre in Ghana

Samuel M Yirenkyi¹, Evans Asante^{2*}, Pearl Nana Yaa Adubea Hammond³

¹*Institute of Film and Television, University of Media, Arts and Communication, Ghana*

²*Department of Theatre Arts, University of Education Winneba, Ghana*

³*Department of Counseling Psychology, University of Education Winneba, Ghana*

*Corresponding Author: Evans Asante, Department of Theatre Arts, University of Education Winneba, Ghana

ABSTRACT

Child labour in Ghana disrupts not only children's physical and economic wellbeing but also their sense of identity, belonging, and childhood. While many rescued children are reintegrated into formal schooling, they often struggle to resettle within families, classrooms, and communities because years of servitude, premature adulthood, and harsh working conditions have reshaped how they understand themselves and how they believe others perceive them. As a result, survivors frequently inhabit multiple, sometimes conflicting identities that complicate their return to community life. Grounded in Swann's Identity Negotiation Theory, this study examines how child labour survivors seek to affirm, defend, and renegotiate their identities in post-rescue contexts. The study argues that reintegration is not merely a logistical or educational process but a deeply social and psychological negotiation between survivors and their communities. Drawing on practitioner-led fieldwork in two high-risk communities of Senya Beraku in the Central Region, where children are trafficked to work in fishing along the Volta Lake, and Sefwi Asawinso in the Western North Region, where children are exploited as cocoa farm labourers, the research employed Image Theatre and Forum Theatre as participatory methods for identity exploration and reconstruction. Through embodied performance, collective reflection, and dialogic intervention, survivors were able to visualize their experiences, challenge stigmatizing narratives, and rehearse alternative identities that enabled greater social belonging. The findings suggest that participatory theatre can serve as a powerful mechanism for identity negotiation, emotional healing, and social reintegration by creating spaces where survivors, families, and community members collaboratively rethink what it means to be a "rescued child."

Keywords: Identity negotiation; child labour survivors; Forum Theatre; Image Theatre; community reintegration.

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Background to the Study

Child labour remains one of the most persistent violations of children's rights in Ghana, affecting children's physical safety, educational trajectories, and psychosocial development. Despite national legislation and international interventions aimed at eliminating its worst forms, structural poverty, cultural expectations, and limited

livelihood opportunities continue to draw children into hazardous work, particularly in fishing and cocoa farming communities. While government agencies, security services, and non-governmental organizations have intensified rescue operations and educational reintegration programmes, less scholarly attention has been paid to the complex identity struggles that accompany children's return to family, school, and community life.

In fishing communities along the Volta Lake, particularly in areas such as Yeji, many children originating from coastal communities like Senya Beraku in the Central Region are trafficked or sent by their families to work as fishing assistants. These children engage in physically demanding and dangerous tasks, including paddling canoes, casting and untangling nets, and diving into deep waters to retrieve submerged equipment. Prolonged exposure to such labour conditions often entails separation from schooling, family support systems, and peer networks. Similarly, in cocoa-growing communities such as Sefwi Asawinso in the Western North Region, children are commonly involved in strenuous agricultural labour, including weeding, harvesting, carrying heavy loads, and handling agrochemicals without protective equipment. In both contexts, children assume adult responsibilities prematurely, developing survival-oriented dispositions marked by resilience, independence, and emotional guardedness.

These lived experiences significantly reshape children's self-perception. Over time, labour becomes central to their identity, normalizing hardship and positioning them as contributors to household survival rather than as learners or dependents. When rescue operations withdraw them from exploitative environments and return them to formal schooling, reintegration is frequently framed as a logistical transition; enrolment in school, return to family, and provision of material support. However, for many survivors, rescue does not mark the end of hardship; instead, it initiates a new and often disorienting process of renegotiating who they are, how they are perceived, and where they belong.

In classroom settings, formerly trafficked or exploited children may experience tension between their lived identities as workers and the socially prescribed identity of the "rescued child" or "student." Some perceive themselves as more mature or capable than age-mates due to their exposure to harsh realities, while simultaneously feeling constrained by institutional rules that emphasize obedience, conformity, and age-appropriate behaviour. Peer relationships may be strained by stigma or misunderstanding, and teachers may struggle to reconcile behavioural expressions of resilience or defiance with expectations of discipline. Within families, caregivers may also confront difficulties adjusting to the transformed personalities of returning children—individuals who have developed independence and hardened coping mechanisms through prolonged labour.

These tensions suggest that reintegration is not merely an educational or administrative process but fundamentally a process of identity negotiation. Post-rescue transition

involves complex social interactions in which survivors attempt to reconcile their labour-formed identities with new expectations imposed by schools, families, and communities. Although scholarship on child protection increasingly recognizes the psychosocial challenges of reintegration, limited attention has been devoted to how children actively negotiate their identities during this period of transition.

This study conceptualizes reintegration through the lens of Swann's Identity Negotiation Theory, which posits that individuals strive for self-verification, seeking recognition and validation of their self-conceptions while navigating others' expectations and interpretations. From this perspective, identity is not fixed but constructed and reconstructed through interaction. For child labour survivors, reintegration becomes a negotiated social process rather than a linear return to "normal" childhood. Survivors seek to affirm aspects of themselves—resilience, competence, endurance—while communities often attempt to reimpose normative childhood identities centered on vulnerability and dependency. The resulting tension underscores the importance of creating structured spaces in which survivors can reflect upon and renegotiate their identities.

To explore this dynamic, the study employs Forum Theatre and Image Theatre, participatory methodologies rooted in Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. These embodied performance approaches enable participants to externalize experiences, visualize power relations, and rehearse alternative identities within safe, dialogic spaces. Conducted in two high-risk communities of Senya Beraku in the Central Region and Sefwi Asawinso in the Western North Region the research examines how participatory theatre can facilitate identity exploration, challenge stigmatizing narratives, and foster social belonging among child labour survivors.

By situating reintegration within the framework of identity negotiation and applied theatre practice, this article argues that participatory theatre can function not only as a psychosocial intervention but as a practical tool for identity reconstruction, emotional healing, and social reintegration. In doing so, the study contributes to scholarship at the intersection of child labour, post-rescue transition, identity theory, and applied theatre in Ghana.

Problem Statement

Although significant efforts have been made to rescue children from hazardous labour and reintegrate them into formal schooling in Ghana, many survivors continue to struggle with belonging in their families, classrooms, and communities. Existing reintegration programmes

in Ghana emphasise removal from hazardous labour, provision of basic services, and reintegration into formal education, yet they tend to treat this reintegration as a largely technical and logistical process (International Justice Mission, 2015; ECPAT International, 2016). Reintegration programs largely emphasize physical rescue and school placement while neglecting the psychosocial and identity dimensions of post-rescue life. (International Justice Mission, 2015; Unicef Ghana, 2018) The failure to address identity dimensions of reintegration represents a significant gap in child protection policy and practice in Ghana, with implications for both survivors' wellbeing and the sustainability of rescue and reintegration efforts. Survivors return with hybrid identities shaped by years of labour that often conflict with societal expectations of childhood, producing stigma, identity tension, and social exclusion. Little research has examined how survivors actively negotiate these identities or how participatory methods such as Image and Forum Theatre can support this process. This study explores how child labour survivors in two Ghanaian communities – Senya Beraku and Sefwi Asawinso – affirm, defend, and renegotiate their identities in post-rescue contexts through participation in Image Theatre and Forum Theatre processes. It further investigates how these participatory practices can help survivors toward more inclusive and sustainable community belonging.

Objectives of the Study

The study pursues three specific objectives:

- i. To examine how child labour survivors negotiate and reconstruct their identities during reintegration into family, school, and community life in Senya Beraku and Sefwi Asawinso.
- ii. To analyze how Forum Theatre and Image Theatre function as mediating spaces for identity negotiation between child labour survivors and their communities.
- iii. To examine how participatory theatre changes community attitudes toward survivors and supports their reintegration.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two interrelated theoretical perspectives: Swann's Identity Negotiation Theory and Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (specifically Forum and Image Theatre). Together, these frameworks provide a lens for analyzing how child labour survivors construct, defend, and renegotiate their identities in post-rescue contexts, and how participatory theatre can mediate this process.

Identity Negotiation Theory

Swann's Identity Negotiation Theory posits that individuals

are motivated to maintain coherence between their self-concepts and how others perceive them, a process known as self-verification (Swann, 1987; Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2003). According to this theory, people actively seek social environments and interactions that affirm their existing identities, even when those identities are socially stigmatized or problematic. When others' perceptions conflict with one's self-view, individuals experience psychological tension and engage in negotiation strategies to restore congruence between self-perception and social recognition (Swann et al., 2003). In the context of child labour survivors, identity negotiation becomes particularly complex. Many survivors return from exploitative labour having developed identities rooted in resilience, independence, and premature adulthood. Upon reintegration, families, schools, and communities often impose the identity of "rescued child," "victim," or "student," which may contradict survivors' lived self-concepts. This misalignment creates what Swann describes as identity threat, prompting survivors to either resist external definitions or modify their self-presentation to gain acceptance (Swann, 1987). Applying this framework to the present study, reintegration is understood not merely as school placement but as a dynamic process of social identity negotiation in which survivors, families, peers, and community members continually contest, affirm, and reshape meanings of childhood, maturity, and belonging. The theory thus provides a conceptual basis for analyzing how participatory theatre facilitates identity dialogue rather than simply delivering psychosocial "treatment."

Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed: Image and Forum Theatre

To examine identity negotiation in practice, this study draws on Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, particularly Image Theatre and Forum Theatre (Boal, 1979). Boal conceptualizes theatre as a rehearsal for social change rather than passive representation, positioning participants as "spect-actors" who both observe and intervene in dramatic scenarios. Image Theatre enables participants to construct physical representations of their lived experiences, power relations, and emotional states through embodied tableaux rather than verbal narration (Boal, 2000). For child labour survivors, this modality allows complex identities of worker, victim, survivor, child, provider to be visualized and collectively interpreted without requiring immediate verbal disclosure, which is especially important in trauma-sensitive contexts. Forum Theatre, by contrast, invites participants and audiences to intervene in staged conflicts, proposing alternative actions and experimenting with new social roles (Boal, 2000). In this study, Forum Theatre is conceptualized as a practical arena for identity negotiation where survivors

and community members rehearse different ways of being seen, treated, and accepted, thereby testing potential pathways toward social belonging. Together, Image and Forum Theatre function as mediating spaces where identity meanings are co-created through embodied performance, dialogue, and collective problem-solving aligning closely with Swann's emphasis on social interaction in identity formation.

Literature Review

Child Labour and Child Trafficking in Ghana: Patterns and Drivers

Child labour in Ghana persists as a multidimensional problem shaped by household poverty, labour demands in key sectors, weak enforcement, and social norms that normalise children's work under certain conditions. Picture a young boy in the cocoa fields of Sefwi Asawinso, his back bent under the weight of harvested pods, or a girl from Senya Beraku casting nets into the Volta Lake before the sun rises; these are the everyday realities for many children. National and international monitoring reports consistently identify hazardous child labour in fishing and cocoa production as among the most entrenched forms (U.S. Department of Labor, 2024). In cocoa-producing regions like the Western North, children often engage in hazardous tasks such as applying pesticides or carrying heavy loads, which expose them to injuries and long-term health risks (Mull & Kirkhorn, 2005; Pirkle et al., 2024). Local surveys paint a stark picture: the Ghana Statistical Service (2020) reports that 21.8% of children aged 5-17 are involved in child labour, with 14.2% in hazardous forms. Earlier national household surveys from 1987-1992 reveal that 28% of children aged 7-14 participated in child labour, predominantly unpaid work in family agricultural enterprises, highlighting how family survival often trumps childhood (Canagarajah & Coulombe, 1997). This participation rate varied, with boys at 33.4% and girls at 27.6%, though including household chores reverses this to 75% for boys and 88% for girls, underscoring gender-based task divisions (Canagarajah & Coulombe, 1997).

Along the Volta Lake fishing economy, children are routinely engaged in tasks that exceed their physical capacity and expose them to serious harm, including deep-water fishing activities and handling heavy equipment (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013). In the cocoa sector, especially in the forest belt and high-yield zones, children may be involved in farm labour such as carrying heavy loads, using sharp tools, and exposure to agrochemicals, with documented occupational hazards and injury risks (Mull & Kirkhorn, 2005). Large-scale sector studies further suggest that prevalence has remained stubbornly high in cocoa-growing areas despite decades of initiatives,

underlining the structural nature of the problem (NORC, 2017). Ghanaian scholarship and policy analysis also emphasise that the dominant framing of "child labour" can obscure important distinctions between socially accepted work and exploitative labour, as well as the political economy that shapes children's vulnerability (Okyere, 2023). In this light, child labour is not only a household-level coping strategy but also a phenomenon sustained by broader inequalities which may include limited rural livelihoods, inadequate social protection, and weak labour markets making "rescue" interventions necessary but insufficient on their own. In cocoa production areas, for example, structural constraints facing smallholder farmers and household dependency pressures have long been recognised as key conditions in which child labour risks intensify (Associates for Change, 2004; International Cocoa Initiative, 2016). Recent empirical work examining Western North cocoa zones also situates the region within wider production pressures and governance dynamics that shape household vulnerability (Ankuyi et al., 2023).

Child labour appears to be deeply rooted in Ghana's socio-economic fabric, where poverty, parental absence, and weak law enforcement push children into work. In peri-urban areas like Pokuase in Accra, children hawk goods on highways, balancing heavy loads that strain their growing bodies (Hamenoo et al., 2018). Factors such as parental death, divorce, or separation exacerbate this, leaving children to support themselves and siblings, often at the expense of their wellbeing (Hamenoo et al., 2018). Cultural perceptions further complicate the issue; in rural communities such as Yindure in Northern region, child labour is sometimes viewed not as exploitation but as a traditional way to teach responsibility and contribute to family welfare, blending necessity with longstanding practices (Bruscino, 2001). In fishing communities along Volta Lake trafficked children endure isolation and abuse, while in cocoa areas, 45% of children in agricultural households are involved in child labour, often hazardous (Sadhu et al., 2020, as cited in Pirkle et al., 2024). For Volta Lake trafficking contexts, operational and investigative studies describe child trafficking into forced labour as pervasive in fishing economies and shaped by organised recruitment, deception, kinship networks, and weak justice responses (International Justice Mission, 2016; U.S. Department of Labor, 2013). Child trafficking research by Challenging Heights (an NGO) documents how children are separated from familiar environments and social capital, and how their lived experiences involve exploitation, control, and diminished agency (Hamenoo et al., 2015). These experiences fragment childhood, replacing play with premature adulthood, and underscore the need for interventions that address both structural drivers and cultural norms.

Psychological and Identity Impacts: From Exploitation to Fractured Selves

The scars of child labour run deeper than visible injuries, reshaping how survivors see themselves and navigate the world. Imagine a rescued child returning to school, haunted by memories of endless toil, struggling to fit in with peers who never carried such burdens. In seeming congruence with Swann's Identity Negotiation Theory, which emphasizes how individuals affirm, defend, and renegotiate self-views for coherence in social contexts (Swann, 1987; Swann & Bosson, 2008), Ghanaian survivors often battle conflicting identities. In cocoa-growing regions, children engaged in hazardous labour face higher odds of repeating a school year, with work-related injuries mediating this effect by 14%, as fatigue and pain hinder concentration and attendance (Pirkle et al., 2024). The psychological and social fallout of child labour is profound. Hamenoo et al. (2018) highlight how child labour impairs education through poor attendance and performance, while health suffers from biomechanical strains like head-loading, leading to chronic pain, accidents, and energy depletion. Children report tiredness causing them to sleep in class, resulting in poor grades, repetition, and eventual dropout, compounded by embarrassment and low self-esteem (Hamenoo et al., 2018). In qualitative accounts, children describe feeling deprived of dignity, their development stunted by exploitation (Odonkor, 2007, as cited in Hamenoo et al., 2018). Econometric analyses from the 1980s-1990s show a significant negative relationship between working and schooling; children in labour are less likely to attend school regularly, with girls more burdened by household chores and boys by external work (Canagarajah & Coulombe, 1997). Cultural attitudes reinforce the phenomenon, where child labour is seen as contributing to character-building, while societies ignore how it fosters stigma and low self-esteem, making reintegration challenging (Bruscino, 2001). Interviews with children in Yindure reveal they view work as necessary for survival, but adults acknowledge its toll, though often justify it as preparation for life (Bruscino, 2001). Identity disruption in survivor contexts can be understood in terms of shifts in self-definition produced by prolonged exploitation, survival responsibility, and premature adult-like roles. Studies of trafficked children along the Volta Lake, for instance, describe children's experiences of forced labour, separation, and constrained agency, conditions that can reshape how a child interprets maturity, autonomy, and trust (Hamenoo et al., 2015). When such children return to school environments that demand compliance, waiting, and age-graded behaviour, tensions may arise not only because of learning gaps but because children are being asked to inhabit an identity

("ordinary student/child") that may not match their lived self-understanding. Although Ghanaian child labour and trafficking scholarship has produced robust evidence on lived experiences and reintegration challenges, fewer studies foreground identity as a central analytic category. Yet the reintegration difficulties described in Ghana-focused research clearly shows evidence of conflict with caregivers, school tension, social judgement, and behavioural adaptation. This points directly to identity processes-how survivors see themselves, how they believe others see them, and how these perceptions are negotiated in everyday interaction (Koomson, 2024). Survivors internalize shame, viewing themselves as burdens, yet resilience emerges through education and community ties. For instance, in trafficked cases, identity reconstruction involves reconciling imposed "worker" roles with reclaimed "child" ones, often marked by emotional distress (Manful et al., 2020). Without support, this negotiation leads to isolation, but targeted interventions can empower survivors to defend their worth and seek belonging.

Reintegration Beyond "Return": Psychosocial Realities and Social Belonging

Much of Ghana's anti-trafficking and child protection practice has focused on withdrawal, rehabilitation, and reintegration. However, the reintegration phase is increasingly recognised as a site of vulnerability where intended protection outcomes may be undermined by social stigma, family conflict, school adjustment challenges, and persistent poverty. Studies provide especially strong evidence that reintegration is often fragile and contested, involving complex negotiations with kin, caregivers, and communities. For example, narratives of reintegrated children indicate that returning "home" can involve disappointment, relational breakdown, or even renewed marginalisation when family environments are unstable or unprepared to support the child (Hamenoo, 2020). Similarly, critical reflections on rescue regimes argue that interventions may produce limited benefits for some children when the structural drivers of exploitation remain intact and reintegration is treated as an administrative endpoint rather than a long-term process (Koomson, 2024).

Recent Ghana-focused work on post-trafficking care under kinship arrangements further demonstrates that reintegration can generate layered pressures: gratitude expectations, surveillance, constrained autonomy, and ambiguous belonging especially where children's experiences are misunderstood or morally judged (Koomson, 2025). Evaluations of child protection programming in Ghana also note that poverty and unemployment repeatedly challenge both prevention and reintegration, as economic

vulnerability makes sustainable resettlement difficult to achieve (U.S. Department of State, 2018). These studies collectively suggest that reintegration is not simply a physical return or school enrolment outcome; it is a social process requiring recognition, support, and negotiated acceptance over time. School reintegration, in particular, can be a flashpoint. Survivors may re-enter classrooms with disrupted schooling histories, different behavioural adaptations, and altered self-perceptions shaped by labour conditions. While child protection discourse frequently assumes that school placement is a straightforward pathway to recovery, research indicates that reintegration into schooling is often strained by stigma, discipline regimes, peer relations, and the emotional aftermath of exploitation (Hamenoo, 2020; Koomson, 2025). This matters for the present study because it shifts attention from “access” to “fit”: whether the child experiences school and community as spaces of belonging, recognition, and possibility. These realities form the backdrop to reintegration challenges: children do not return home as they left; their identities, expectations, and social positioning have shifted.

Participatory Theatre as a Pathway to Identity Renegotiation and Healing

Amid these hardship and uncertainties faced by these children participatory theatre emerges as a beacon of hope, drawing on Ghana’s storytelling heritage to help survivors reclaim their narratives. Envision a group of children in a forum theatre session, freezing in poses that capture the weight of a fishing net or the sting of a cocoa machete cut; through these acts, they externalize trauma and rehearse new futures. Rooted in Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, image and forum theatre allow embodied exploration of oppression, ideal for those whose experiences defy words (Boal, 2000). In Ghana, Theatre for Development (TfD) has adapted these methods, blending them with indigenous local tales for cultural resonance (Yankah, 2022). TfD have a long history in Ghana and across Africa as participatory approaches for dialogue, conscientisation, and community action. While TfD is often discussed in relation to development communication and community mobilisation, scholarship also traces its institutionalisation and pedagogical uses, including how participatory forms such as Forum Theatre can structure collective problem-posing and local ownership (Hakib, 2022). Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, particularly Image Theatre and Forum Theatre, is especially relevant to reintegration contexts because it treats theatre as a rehearsal space for social change and redistributes interpretive power to participants and audiences (Boal, 2000).

Image Theatre enables participants to externalise lived realities through embodied images, making complex

social experiences visible without requiring immediate verbal disclosure (Boal, 2000). In survivor contexts, such embodied representation can be significant where trauma, shame, or fear limit narrative expression. Forum Theatre, by inviting audiences to intervene and propose alternatives, becomes a public site where communities rehearse different responses to social conflict, including empathy, accountability, and support (Boal, 2000). In Ghana, theatre-based child labour and trafficking interventions have been used in community sensitisation and dialogue formats, illustrating the practical relevance of participatory performance for social issues affecting children (Curious Minds Ghana, 2024). Theatre has also been used as a forum to amplify survivor testimony and create public conversation on hidden exploitation, indicating its potential for shifting community narratives and recognition (Collins, 2021).

Local applications show promise: in cocoa and fishing communities, TfD raises awareness of hazardous labour’s toll on education and health, challenging perceptions that normalize child work (Hamenoo et al., 2018; Bruscano, 2001). By staging scenarios like a child repeating a class due to injury, participants intervene to rewrite outcomes, practicing agency and reducing stigma (Pirkle et al., 2024). This aligns with identity negotiation, as survivors affirm positive self-views and defend against labels like “damaged.” Ghanaian initiatives, such as those by Child Rights International, use drama to turn victims into advocates, fostering emotional healing and social bonds (Child Rights International, 2025). However, much of the existing use of theatre in anti-trafficking work emphasises awareness and prevention rather than identity reconstruction and reintegration. Awareness-oriented theatre can influence attitudes, but it may not directly address the identity conflicts survivors face when they return to school and family systems that do not recognise their lived maturity or survival adaptations. This gap points to the importance of grounding participatory theatre in a theory of identity negotiation: theatre is not only a message vehicle, but a structured space where recognition can be renegotiated and new social relationships rehearsed.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, practitioner-led, participatory action research (PAR) design informed by applied theatre methodologies. The approach was appropriate because it was intended to understand identity negotiation among child labour survivors and to intervene in that process through collaborative, reflective, and emancipatory practices. The study, therefore, combined inquiry and practice, positioning participants as co-creators

of knowledge rather than passive subjects of investigation. Participatory action research was particularly suitable because it aligns with both Swann’s Identity Negotiation Theory, which emphasizes identity as socially constructed through interaction, as well as Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, which views theatre as a collective process of critical reflection and social rehearsal. The research was conducted over a six-month period across two communities with high prevalence of child labour: Senya Beraku (Central Region) and Sefwi Asawinso (Western North Region).

Study Sites

The study was conducted in two purposively selected communities in Ghana: Senya Beraku in the Central Region and Sefwi Asawinso in the Western North Region. Senya Beraku is a coastal source community from which many children are sent to work in fishing along the Volta Lake, particularly in Yeji; although the labour occurs in Yeji, rescued children are returned to Senya Beraku where they often struggle with reintegration into family, school, and

community life. Senya Beraku has a population of about 161,400 (2021 Ghana Housing Census). Sefwi Asawinso is a cocoa-farming community in the Sefwi Wiawso Municipal Assembly with a population of about 15,720 (Male:7,689, Female 8,031). Children are commonly engaged in hazardous agricultural labour and later returned through NGO and government interventions. These sites were chosen because they represent the two dominant arenas of child labour in Ghana—fishing and cocoa farming—and present comparable challenges related to schooling, family relations, and community acceptance.

Study Participants

Participants in the study consisted of child labour survivors and key community stakeholders drawn from the two research sites. Sixty-five (65) participants were purposively drawn from the two study sites. Participation was voluntary; assent was obtained from all child participants, with informed consent provided by guardians and community leaders.

Table 1. *Distribution of Participants*

Participant	Location	Number	Characteristics
Child labour survivors	Senya Beraku	19	Ages 10–16; previously withdrawn from child labour through NGO or government rescue efforts; currently reintegrated into school or community programs
Child labour survivors	Sefwi Asawinso	19	Ages 10–16; previously withdrawn from child labour through NGO or government rescue efforts; currently reintegrated into school or community programs
Community stakeholders	Both sites	24	Parents, teachers, traditional leaders, youth representatives, and local NGO workers
Total		62	

Data Generation Methods

Image Theatre Workshops

Image Theatre sessions were conducted with the survivors in both communities. Participants were invited to create physical tableaux representing:

- Their life during child labour
- Their experience of being rescued
- Their current life in school and community

These embodied images allowed participants to externalize complex identities such as worker, survivor, child, provider, victim, student, etc. without requiring detailed verbal disclosure. Facilitators guided reflective discussions around each image, prompting participants to explain what their bodies represented and how they felt being seen in particular ways. This method was particularly valuable for exploring *identity tension, self-perception, and social*

recognition, key concerns in Swann’s Identity Negotiation Theory

Forum Theatre Performances

Forum Theatre was used as the primary intervention method. Community-based scenarios were collaboratively devised based on themes that emerged from the Image Theatre sessions and preliminary conversations with survivors and stakeholders.

Key scenarios included:

- A rescued child struggling to follow strict classroom rules
- A survivor feeling disrespected by peers who had never worked
- A parent attempting to control a returned child
- A teacher treating a survivor as a problem student

Performances were staged in public community spaces. Audience members including parents, teachers, and other community members were invited to intervene by replacing characters and proposing alternative actions. This forum theatre session created a dynamic space for *identity negotiation between survivors and their communities*. Forum Theatre thus functioned as both a research tool (revealing social attitudes) and a pedagogical tool (facilitating dialogue and change).

In-Depth Interviews and Focus Groups

After the theatre processes, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with:

- Child survivors
- Parents
- Teachers
- Local leaders

Interviews explored issues such as:

- How survivors perceived themselves before and after labour
- How they felt treated in school and community
- Whether theatre influenced their sense of belonging
- How community members now viewed the children

These narratives were used to triangulate findings from the theatre processes.

Data Analysis

First, the data were coded for key identity themes, including identity conflict, self-verification, experiences of stigmatization, and feelings of belonging or exclusion. This helped to capture how survivors described who they were and how community members and how others perceived these survivors. Secondly, the themes were mapped onto Swann's Identity Negotiation Theory. The analysis focused on moments when survivors tried to confirm their own self-views (self-verification), when they felt their identities were threatened, and the strategies they used to negotiate recognition from others. Lastly, the theatre processes were interpreted through Boal's framework. An examination of how Image Theatre made embodied identities visible and how Forum Theatre provided the platform for survivors and stakeholders to rehearse new, and affirming better ways of relating.

Findings

This section presents the key findings from the study, drawing on evidence from Image Theatre workshops, Forum Theatre performances, and in-depth interviews in Senya Beraku and Sefwi Asawinso. The findings are

organized around three interrelated themes: (i) fragmented and contested identities among child survivors; (ii) participatory theatre as a space for identity negotiation, and (iii) shifts in community perceptions and survivor self-understanding.

Fragmented and contested identities among survivors

Across both communities, child labour survivors exhibited multiple and conflicting identities that shaped their reintegration experiences. Three dominant identity positions emerged from both performance and interview data.

The Worker Identity

Many survivors continued to identify themselves primarily as workers rather than children. In Image Theatre, they consistently embodied postures of strength, endurance, and self-reliance. These were evident in images showing bent bodies, tightened fists, and mimed labour movements.

One survivor in Senya Beraku explained: "*When I was in Yeji, I fed myself. I worked like a man. Coming back here, people want me to behave like a small child again, but I am not that child anymore.*" (male, 14, Senya Beraku)

Similarly, a participant in Sefwi Asawinso stated: "*On the farm, I carried heavy loads and worked every day. In school now, they tell me to sit quietly like I know nothing. It makes me feel lazy.*" (female, 13, Sefwi Asawinso)

These statements illustrate what Swann describes as **self-verification motives** where survivors seek recognition of the identity they had developed through labour rather than the identity imposed on them as rescued children.

The Rescued Child/Victim Identity

Families, teachers, and NGOs frequently labeled survivors as "rescued children" or "victims." In Forum Theatre scenarios, this identity was often depicted as passive, dependent, and needing correction.

A teacher in Senya Beraku remarked during post-performance dialogue that

"These children have suffered, so we must control them closely, otherwise they will go back to bad ways." (teacher, Senya Beraku)

In response, a survivor challenged this by saying "*They think because we were rescued, we don't know how to think. They talk to us any how all the time.*" (female, 15, Senya Beraku)

This tension reflects **identity threat**, as survivors resisted externally imposed identities that conflicted with their self-concept.

The Student Identity and Classroom Conflict

School reintegration required survivors to perform as obedient students, often in ways that contradicted their lived maturity.

One participant in Sefwi Asawinso explained: *“In class, I am older in mind than most of my mates, but the teacher treats me like I am foolish because I once worked on a farm.”* (male, 14, Sefwi Asawinso)

Another survivor stated: *“I feel like I don’t belong. I have lived a harder life than them, but they laugh at me.”* (female, 12, Senya Beraku)

These experiences produced **identity dissonance**, leading to feelings of alienation from both school and community.

Participatory Theatre as a space for Identity Negotiation

The *image theatre workshop* enabled survivors to externalize complex identity conflicts through the body rather than words.

In Senya Beraku, three dominant images recurred. These were *Labour Image*, *Rescue Image* and *School environment image*. The labour image depicted bodies bent forward, mimicking paddling canoes and pulling nets. One participant reflected *“When I stand like this, I remember how strong I had to be to survive.”* (male, 13, Senya Beraku) In Sefwi Asawinso, similar patterns appeared. One striking image placed survivors at the edge of a family circle. A participant remarked: *“Even at home, I feel like I am not fully part of the family anymore.”* (female, 13, Asawinso)

These images revealed how labour reshaped identity, belonging, and power relations.

The Forum Theatre became a public platform where identities were contested, renegotiated, and reframed. Key scenarios included in the forum theatre were: *a survivor being punished for speaking out in class; a parent attempting to control a returned child; peers mocking a survivor as “misfit;”* and lastly, *a community elder labeling survivors as “troublesome.”* During the intervention stage,

three major shifts became evident:

- a. Audience members began to acknowledge survivors as capable social actors rather than passive victim.

A parent in Senya Beraku stated after intervening: *“I did not understand that my child still thinks like a worker. I must learn to talk with him, not just command him.”* (Parent, Senya Beraku)

- b. Teachers proposed more supportive approaches.

One teacher remarked: *“We need to guide them slowly, not just punish them. They are different, but they are still children.”* (Teacher, Sefwi Asawinso)

- c. Community members shifted from blaming survivors to sharing responsibility.

A local leader in Sefwi Asawinso said: *“If we want these children to feel belonging again, the whole community must change how we treat them.”* (Chief’s representative, Sefwi Asawinso)

These shifts align with Swann’s view that identity is shaped through social interaction rather than one imposed unilaterally.

Shifts in community perceptions and survivor self-understanding

The post-theatre interviews showed meaningful changes in how survivors understood themselves. The following shows how several participants expressed a reframed identity.

“Before, I saw myself only as a worker. Now I see myself as a child who worked.” (male, 14, Senya Beraku)

Another survivor said: *“I feel I can be myself in school now, not just pretend.”* (female, 12, Sefwi Asawinso)

Many reported increased confidence in participating in class and peer activities.

Cross-Site Comparison

Despite different labour contexts (fishing vs. cocoa farming), patterns were consistent

Theme	Senya Beraku (Fishing)	Sefwi Asawinso (Cocoa)
Identity conflict	High	High
School tension	Strong	Strong
Community stigma	Present	Present
Theatre impact	Positive	Positive
Collective dialogue	Increased	Increased

Discussion of Findings

This study set out to examine how child labour survivors negotiate their identities during reintegration and how Forum and Image Theatre mediate this process. Interpreted

through Swann’s Identity Negotiation Theory, the findings reveal that reintegration is fundamentally a social negotiation of identity rather than a purely educational or rehabilitative process. The evidence from Senya Beraku

and Sefwi Asawinso demonstrates that identity conflict, self-verification, identity threat, and negotiated recognition are central dynamics shaping survivors' experiences of belonging.

Identity Conflict and the Struggle for Self-Verification

Swann's theory posits that individuals seek *self-verification*—confirmation from others that aligns with how they see themselves (Swann, 1987). The findings show that many survivors returned from labour with a strong worker identity rooted in resilience, autonomy, and survival competence. However, families, teachers, and community institutions frequently imposed the identity of “rescued child,” “victim,” or “problematic student,” which conflicted with survivors' self-concepts. This mismatch generated psychological tension and social friction. Survivors resisted infantilization in classrooms, felt misunderstood at home, and experienced exclusion in peer groups. Their statements such as “*I worked like a man, but they treat me like a small child*” illustrate classic self-verification struggles. They wanted their lived maturity to be recognized rather than erased. From an identity negotiation perspective, this suggests that reintegration programs that focus solely on schooling without addressing identity continuity risk deepening alienation. Survivors were not rejecting education per se; rather, they were resisting identity erasure embedded within institutional norms that failed to acknowledge their lived experiences.

Identity Threat and Defensive Postures

Swann argues that when individuals experience *identity threat*, they engage in defensive strategies to protect their self-concept (Swann et al., 2003). Many survivors adopted hardened demeanors, withdrew from classroom participation, or challenged authority as a way of defending their worker identity against stigmatizing labels. In the forum theatre scenarios, survivors frequently portrayed themselves as defiant or misunderstood, while teachers depicted them as “undisciplined.” This tension reflects how institutions unintentionally amplified identity threat by framing survivors primarily as victims or problems rather than as young people shaped by harsh circumstances. The forum theatre process made these dynamics visible, enabling both survivors and community members to recognize that resistance was not simply misbehavior but a response to threatened identity. This reframing is significant because it shifts blame from the child to the social environment that fails to validate their identity.

Theatre as a Space for Negotiated Recognition

A central contribution of this study is showing how Image and Forum Theatre created structured spaces for identity

negotiation, aligning with Swann's emphasis on social interaction in identity formation. Through image theatre, survivors externalized their identities in pictorial forms—worker, survivor, student—making internal conflicts publicly visible. This allowed communities to see the complex nature of the identities of these survivors. The images/drawings became a mode of identity dialogue before words. The forum theatre then functioned as a public space of negotiated recognition where both community members and survivors could experiment with alternative responses and rehearse new ways of relating to each other. Importantly, identity negotiation did not occur solely within the individual; it was collectively co-constructed through performance, dialogue, and intervention. As community members began to understand survivors' experiences by acknowledging their maturity, hardship, and resistance, survivors in turn reported feeling more legitimate and less stigmatized. This reflects a clear case of successful *self-verification* processes mediated through participatory theatre.

From Imposed Identities to Co-Created Identities

Prior to the intervention, identities were largely imposed by external actors (NGOs, schools, parents, authorities). After the theatre process, identity meanings became more co-created and easily comprehensible. Teachers shifted from punitive control to empathetic guidance; parents moved from command to dialogue while community leaders recognized collective responsibility. This movement from unilateral labeling to negotiated meaning is central to Swann's theory which states that *identity is stabilized when individuals and their social environment reach greater alignment*. The theatre process did not “change” survivors' identities but helped redefine social recognition around them.

Conclusion and implications

This study demonstrates that the reintegration of child labour survivors in Ghana is fundamentally a process of identity negotiation rather than merely school placement or rehabilitation. Congruent with Swann's Identity Negotiation Theory, the findings show that survivors return with complex identities shaped by labour, which often conflict with how families, schools, and communities define them. This mismatch creates tension, stigma, and exclusion that hinder successful reintegration. Forum and Image Theatre proved to be effective tools for mediating this process. Through embodied and participatory performance, theatre created spaces where identities could be expressed, contested, and renegotiated. This enabled communities to move from imposing identities on survivors toward engaging with them more empathetically, while helping survivors feel seen, validated, and more accepted. Theoretically, the

study extends Identity Negotiation Theory to community-level processes and highlights the role of performance in identity work. Practically, it suggests that reintegration programs must prioritize identity reconstruction alongside education and material support. Ultimately, sustainable reintegration is achieved not simply when survivors return to school, but when they experience genuine belonging within their families, classrooms, and communities. Given the findings of the study, it is recommended that reintegration programmes should deliberately incorporate identity-focused psychosocial support. Beyond school placement and material assistance, rescued children should be given structured spaces such as dialogue, storytelling, and participatory arts to negotiate who they are and how they wish to be recognised. Also, participatory theatre should be institutionalised as a core reintegration strategy. Sustained use of Forum Theatre and Image Theatre can help survivors process lived experiences, rehearse new social roles, and engage communities in shared reflection, thereby strengthening reintegration outcomes and social acceptance. Moreover, reintegration efforts must be linked to broader community and economic support systems. Without addressing poverty, schooling costs, and family livelihoods, gains in identity and wellbeing always remain fragile. Effective reintegration therefore requires coordinated investment in education, household economic stability, and community development to prevent re-trafficking and exclusion.

If reintegration is to be truly transformative, it must move beyond rescuing children from labour to restoring their sense of self, dignity, and belonging. Participatory theatre grounded in identity negotiation offers a powerful pathway toward this goal by enabling survivors and communities to learn together, speak with one another, and imagine new possibilities for shared life.

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