Finding the voices of children and youth in street situations in Rio de Janeiro
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Introduction
Although adult-centred studies of children have long dominated academic research, the social sciences are increasingly basing children’s research on the premise that childhood is socially constructed and that children are competent social actors who have a particular perspective on the social world that adults should listen to (James and James, 2001). With the introduction of such concepts, the study of one particular subgroup of children - those living and circulating on the streets - has undergone a dramatic shift. Whereas these young people were once regarded primarily as anti-social, amoral, inclined to criminal activities, and difficult or impossible to rehabilitate, they are increasingly being viewed as “strong and astute beings” in spite of being exploited, poor and oppressed citizens of our society (Rizzini 1996; Ennew 2003).

These children are commonly referred to as “street children,” but the use and definition of such a term has met resistance because it both stigmatizes the children and overlooks the differences between them. Ennew (2003) points out that the term “street children” has been a focus of attention for international bodies and scholars since 1979 but it was not until the beginning of the 1990s that a distinction was made between the children’s differing circumstances. A widely accepted set of definitions, commonly attributed to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), divides street children into two main categories: home based - those who stay on the streets only during the days (and who often engage in economic activity like vending or begging), and street based - those who have lost contact with their families and communities and live permanently on the streets (Lemba

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2002; Scanlon et al. 1998). It should be noted that in order to account for this difference and still include both types, the authors of this article prefer to use “children and youth in street situations” as an all-encompassing term to refer to children and youth who spend a vast part of the day and/or night in the street without their families.

Regardless of how they are labelled or defined, these children and young people are highly neglected and deprived, and generally lack family care and protection, as well as access to healthcare and education. Moreover, many people consider them worthless and undesirable citizens, and several countries have used violent and punitive measures to remove them from the streets (Scanlon et al. 1998), although more recent approaches aim to restore the dignity and improve the integration of these children. Central to these approaches is the acknowledgement that in fending for themselves, these children - regardless of age - are able to think logically and act competently. That is to say, these children and adolescents possess agency; they often fill adult roles and possess competencies and perspectives that mirror closely those of adults. Thus in recent years, research has begun to treat children and youth in street situations as active participants in society who are capable of constructing and reconstructing the meanings of their daily realities (Swart-Kruger and Chawla 2002; Ennew 2003).

Along with the realisation that children construct their own meaning is the recognition that they have a right to share those constructions by being actively involved in research. The expansion of data collection methods enables researchers now to collect data with children, as opposed to collecting data about children from an adult perspective (Ennew 1994; Boyden and Ennew 1997; Beazley 2003; Ebigbo 2003; RWG-CL 2003; Shanahan 2003). Various studies concerning children and youth in street situations have included their individual perspectives on their daily lives and experiences (Pempelani 2000; Raffaelli et al. 2001; Mikulak 2003; Raffaelli and Koller 2005). Nonetheless, an analysis of 108 national reports regarding children in street situations deduced that the literature “tends to reduce the life and development of street children to the behaviours of child workers, beggars, deviant and criminal persons, drug addicts and prostitutes” where “taking the children off the street is always the goal, to be achieved by will or by force” (Krappmann 2007: 45).

An event organized in October 2007 by the Institut Internationale des Droits de L’Enfant and Institut Universitaire Kurt Bosch (IUKB) brought together professionals and
researchers who discussed some of the challenges, guidelines and recommendations that influence the lives of these children. A common theme in the discussion was the realisation that national reports on this population are generally brief statements that lack reliable data. Consequently, there is still a great need to carry out in-depth studies that tell us about the cultural and social structures in which the children and youth live so that we can begin to understand and tackle the root causes of this global urban phenomenon.

We argue that such an understanding cannot come about without the active participation of the children and youth themselves. This article presents an example of how researchers at the International Centre for Research and Policy on Childhood (CIESPI), in association with the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio), have incorporated the notion that children and youth are social actors capable of adding to the knowledge base in their own voices. To do so, we highlight findings from a study carried out with children and youth in street situations in Rio de Janeiro. Our analysis looks at the youths’ responses at an individual level, thereby respecting their unique contributions, while simultaneously drawing commonalities and differences from their stories to get a better picture of the circumstances they are in collectively.

By highlighting the children and young people’s own voices and perspectives in our research, we focus on their agency as social actors and empower them to become involved in the decision-making process, albeit indirectly. Our article demonstrates that when given the opportunity to engage in the research as capable and active social participants, these children and youth can offer their unique insight to help us understand the motivating factors that influence their decisions to leave their homes and communities, along with the daily choices they make to live and survive on the streets. We thus deem it critical to focus on their agency as inhabitants of the street so that we can be sure to incorporate their perspectives when developing public policies, programs, and services to tackle the particular challenges they face.

The Brazilian context

Brazil, with its large population of children and young people who are in street situations, has produced important research that contributes to the study of this population. During the 1970s, the growing number of children and youth in street situations in Brazil was widely seen as a growing social problem. The political and economic context of the times contributed to this popular perception; Brazil was undergoing a developmental crisis that
vastly redistributed income, whilst unemployment and internal migration from rural areas to the big cities, primarily Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, helped increase the number of children, youth, and adults in street situations.

The studies carried out to understand the phenomenon at the time informed the country’s official response, despite having limited information and no input from the parties affected. According to Altoé (1993), there were several qualitative research studies that focused on children and youth who were institutionalised, but did not include in-depth analyses of children and youth living in other contexts. Nonetheless, this early research provided a better understanding of the main characteristics of this population, such as where they came from, whether or not they maintained their links with family and community, their ages, and estimates of their number. The qualitative research gradually expanded to include structured or semi-structured interviews and participant observation, where researchers would spend time accompanying children and youths circulating the streets (Vogel and Mello 1991; Fenelon, Martins and Domingues 1992; Hecht 1998).

Such approaches not only enriched knowledge on this topic area, but also led to the acceptance and proliferation of the aforementioned belief that these children can act as both subjects of, and contributors to, the research. As will be demonstrated in the following sections, CIESPI researchers attempted to learn about children and youths in street situations simply by providing them with a forum to share their stories and an audience willing to listen. This article is not intended to present the findings from the study insomuch as it highlights the intentional approach to how the research was carried out.

Methodology
This study focuses on a group of children and young people in Brazil who daily experience the hardships of the streets and who wander between home, the streets, and social institutions while exposed to different forms of violence and abuse. The study was carried out by CIESPI with the participation of social educators from a network called Rede Rio Criança (Rio’s Children’s Network) between October and December 2001. The data were collected from semi-structured interviews with 67 children and youths between 8 to

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3 Rede Rio Criança is formed by 16 non-governmental organizations of Rio de Janeiro.
4 The article does not intend to present those findings, but highlight how the research was carried out and its purpose in giving the participants a voice.
18 years of age who were living in street situations in Rio de Janeiro. A group of street workers were also interviewed, bringing the total number of people included in the study to approximately 120.

The methodological approach was based on the research and seminars of Daniel Stoecklin regarding the Child-Street System. Overall, this particular model emphasizes the connections established between the child and the multiple aspects of his/her life, while identifying his/her competencies and vulnerabilities. In order to establish these connections, it is vital to interact with the child over a period of time and conduct systematic observation (Stoecklin, 2000). One limitation of this study is that the data were collected over a relatively short period of time - two months - which can restrict how deep and meaningful a relationship can be developed between the educator/interviewer and the child.

The children and young people participated in extensive interviews where they were able to talk freely about their life trajectories, from how they left their homes and went to the streets, to their day-to-day experiences, expectations and dreams. Their testimonies revealed that they are acutely aware of their lives’ difficult circumstances and have much to tell about how to survive in such adverse conditions. Some of the questions asked in the interviews include the following:

- Why did you leave home?
- Who did you live with?
- Who raised you?
- Are you in touch with your mother?
- Prior to living in the street, did you imagine it to be a certain way?

It is important to note that these children and youths are not often given the opportunity to express themselves - they are generally so marginalized and discriminated against that they are not expected to have anything important to say. The CIESPI researchers therefore enabled children and young people to tell their own stories and share their perceptions, thereby providing a better understanding of the social world they inhabit. The model used by the researchers emphasised the subjective elements of their actions and stories, while respecting their values and meanings. Those involved in the research shared the reasons why they left home, the risks they face, and how they identify safety strategies. By highlighting the findings from the study and providing excerpts from the
interviews, we demonstrate that children and youths - like adults - have agency. They are capable of viewing, understanding, and describing their social contexts and competently dealing with everyday issues and challenges.

The Voices of Children and Youth in Street Situations in Rio de Janeiro

The young people interviewed generally reported that the decision to leave home takes shape gradually. They begin by spending the day on the streets and returning home at night. Meanwhile, they become familiar with new places to hang out and they begin to establish friendships on the streets. The decision to completely leave the home is usually motivated by some kind of rupture in the home environment. In many cases, this rupture takes place in the relationship between the child or young person and the parents, stepparents, grandparents, or other guardians. The most common age group in which children in Rio leave home falls between 7 and 11 years of age. During this time, relationships with people outside of the home who serve as reference points begin to have a major influence on their behaviour.

Other motivations cited for leaving the home are the desire for freedom, the chance to earn their own money, and an end to pressure from family, especially that of parents or guardians. Several young people stated that the streets provide freedom:

*In the streets, you don’t have to listen to the same things that are said at home. They don’t throw anything in your face. Sometimes, in the street you can be hungry and you know that you are risking your life, but, even so, in a way you are free. You can think what you want, do what you want, you can do things however you feel like it.* (Sandra, 15 years old).

*I started to sleep on the street because I want to go out. My dad doesn’t give me the keys to the house, and even when we arrive home in the early hours he doesn’t want to open the door for us. So I stay out on the street. We want to go out and he doesn’t give us the freedom, so we started to stay out.* (Lorenza, 17 years old).

For many of the young people, the mobility acquired by the money they make on the streets is one of the main reasons they are attracted to wandering the streets permanently, in spite of the challenges. These children and youths usually earn money through odd jobs, thievery, or begging. The money is then primarily spent on the purchase of personal products, to help their families, and on leisure activities.
Another consideration revealed by the young people is that the streets offer alternative types of affection and opportunities from those found at home. When asked what it was like to be on the streets, one of the interviewees said:

*Here where I stay, everyone is a friend. If a police car comes by to get us, everybody goes, because here we are united. If someone wins something, it is shared amongst everybody, because half the people here have no mother. So we survive like a family on the street.* (Filomena, 15 years old).

Nonetheless, children who experience life on the streets face many obstacles in their attempt to survive, such as enhanced risks of sexual abuse, exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, use of harmful substances, and aggression from other youths, police and private security guards. As one 15-year-old youth noted, “*on the street, it is dangerous to sleep because you never know how the next day will be, because there are good people and bad people.*”

The vast majority of the children interviewed reported unfair and brutal treatment by police officers. An older youth stated:

*There is nothing good on the street. It’s good when the person is little, but from 15, 16 upwards, things get even worse … It gets worse because the guards beat us. Bigger ones more, we get hit for the little ones too.* (Aldair, 17 years old).

Because police brutality is a constant danger, children and young people develop their own strategies to counteract this violence. Perhaps most common, many children and youth opt to live in small groups as a means of increasing their feelings of protection and safety in numbers. The members of any given group tend to get together during the night-time, when they are most likely to be exposed to violence.

For the females, the group option is meant, above all, to reduce their exposure to sexual abuse. One 15-year-old girl stated, ‘*Here, I have more friends. You know, when I sleep, I always have somebody awake and on the lookout to see if someone is going to try to abuse me.*’ For others, however, the group can bring more problems than solutions because of conflict and distrust between group members, as expressed by a 17 year old girl:

*I, in particular, don’t like to be in a group. I don’t like it. I prefer to be by myself, alone. I like to have friends, but it depends a lot … because being in a group can bring problems.*
With respect to the use of harmful substances, the interviewees stated that they most frequently use marijuana and thinner, followed by cocaine and glue. The preference for marijuana, as cited, arises from the sensation of relaxation following a day full of challenges.

Despite the many hardships faced, it is striking that the children and youths maintain a capacity to have fun, laugh, and play. They also maintain a desire to leave their current lives behind in exchange for increased opportunities. When asked about their future aspirations, they often voiced a desire to build a family, finish school and find a job. One 15-year-old girl said:

*I’m going to get married and have kids … I will build a family with my mother, my children, my husband and grandchildren. Can you believe that? I’m already thinking about grandchildren.*

In addition to sharing their views of life on the streets, the youth and children provided insight as to what they think ought to constitute priorities in the political agenda to prevent other children from becoming “street children.” One youth stated:

*If I were president of Brazil, I would offer different courses so each person would take at least one course. If the government offered some kind of financial assistance, for instance fifty reais for each participant, they would think ‘See, I’m making money and I don’t need to go to the streets and ask for money or steal. I can buy my own clothes and I can help my mother.’ The youth would think differently. They wouldn’t need to go the street, or use drugs; it would be something to do with their free time.*

According to Rizzini and Butler (2003), in order for these children’s aspirations to be fulfilled, the challenge is to find ways to engage them with other sectors of society, including those that discriminate against them and exclude them from the possibility of social mobility.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the interview excerpts demonstrate that children and young people in street situations have an acute and extensive understanding of their life conditions, including both the positive and negative aspects. We have briefly presented some of the data gathered in the course of the research in order to highlight the fact that, despite being children, they know, understand, and can articulate a great deal about their life situations.
and their surroundings. In Brazil, there is a great need to have such a detailed understanding of this population because they are present in all of our major cities. Although we still lack much concrete data, the qualitative data stemming from the children themselves helps expand the existing body of knowledge about and research on children and young people in street situations.

This article demonstrates that by approaching children and youths as active participants in their unique social contexts, and respecting and listening to them, we get a rich insight into their lives that - as adults - we would not otherwise have. At the very least, such child- and adolescent-centred data provide us with an additional and much-needed lens through which we can analyse and develop a dynamic model that practitioners, administrators, policy-makers and researchers can use to provide effective policies and services for these children and young people (Staller 2004).

This research also makes it clear that young people in vulnerable situations can fully understand their surroundings and are capable of participating in finding solutions to the problems that affect them. In our example, we were able not only to learn about the different life trajectories of various children and youths through their own voices, but to also identify commonalities from their experiences that can help shape future research, policies and practices. The approach used in this research - of viewing children as active participants in society - can be successfully applied in different contexts for multiple purposes, and in countries as remote as England and Brazil. As such, it is critical to recognise that children should be considered as important contributors to, and not just subjects of, childhood studies carried out around the world.

References


