

Full Length Research Paper

Listen to the voices of street children: A case study in Trinidad and Tobago

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This research was conducted at Sunshine in Trinidad and Tobago and highlights the voices of seventeen street children. Although they live at Sunshine many of them continue to frequent the streets. Published research indicates that there exists a paucity of information about the lives and experiences of these children. It is important that professionals and policy makers pay particular attention and consideration to the voices of these children especially when they formulate policies that pertain to their lives. A case study was conducted to carefully ascertain as accurately as possible their experiences. Semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaire were also employed. Data revealed that listening is necessary to try to understand the lives and perspectives of these children. Although it is difficult and demanding, it is strongly suggested that professionals, policy makers and indeed all citizens listen carefully to the voices of these children to bring about some meaningful change.

Key words: Street children, listen, voices case study.

INTRODUCTION

Trinidad and Tobago comprises two main islands and several smaller ones. It lies close to the Northeast of Venezuela and Northwest of Guyana. Trinidad, the larger of the two, has about 4,800 square km. The presence of street children in Trinidad and Tobago is a relatively new phenomenon. This is probably because there is a dearth of information as well as very little is known about their lives.

“Ah want to work in ah´chicken & chips place.”

“Ah doh no wah ah really want.”

“De government an´ dem, Ah do no.”

“It should have less violence in Trinidad.”

“A lot ah fighting wit´ de youths and dem.”

These voices clearly represent some of the perspectives of these seventeen children who live at Sunshine, a center for homeless children. Although they live at Sunshine some of them still return to the streets. Their voices and experiences are of paramount importance since there is a dearth of information about their experiences in the local context. It is also strongly felt that their experiences must be given proper consideration by policy makers especially when they create programmes that govern their lives.

Too often, policies, pertaining to street children are

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implemented with little or no consultation with them. Thus, the principal objective of this study is to allow these children to express their opinions freely and honestly. In this way, their experiences could influence and assist policy makers. Hence, this study could point a possible way forward especially if the presence of street children continues to increase. This research carefully investigated the lives and situations of these children during the semester August to December 2020, at Sunshine in Trinidad and Tobago. They attend various secondary schools, whenever they can and participate in all aspects of daily life. During these five months these children participated in their schoolwork which was offered via Google Classroom. Keeping this focus carefully in mind, which is to try to understand their lives, this study seeks to answer the research question: What are your experiences of street life? Data revealed that these children are acutely aware of their own situation and are also quite competent in presenting their issues. It also revealed the significance of listening to their experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review demonstrates the complexity in trying to arrive at a precise definition for street children. It also explains the actual life that many of them endure daily on the streets.

Definitions of street children

It is seemingly difficult to formulate an accurate definition of street children. This is largely because this scenario is extremely complex and contentious. Furthermore, various countries choose to define them in several ways. The street children phenomenon has been explored across several disciplines and there are several meanings attached to it (Dladla and Ogina, 2018). Daba et al. (2020) also corroborate this fact and further claim that street children have a variety of definitions in different scenarios. Extensive research also reveals that street children is a socially constructed concept and is described in different ways by different social actors, depending on the context in which the phenomenon takes place (De Moura, 2002; Stephenson, 2001). Setiawatia and Syafarib (2020) state that: "Street children are a public ongoing problem that has not been resolved..." Since they view street children in such a manner, they further claim that: "The management of street children is of paramount importance and has to become the center of attention for both formal and informal organizations..." Thus, a review of the literature clearly reveals that street children are often described in a purely negative manner. Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman (2016) offer a different perspective. They believe that

street children are poor children who lack proper guidance and direction in their lives. Similarly, Action for the Rights of Children (2001-2021) states that: "Children and adolescents are not short adults - they are qualitatively different. They have physical, psychological and social needs that must be met to enable healthy growth and development." Action for the Rights of Children (2001-2021) further mentions that: "Children and adolescents are not a homogenous group. While they share basic universal needs, the expression of those needs depends on a wide range of personal, social and cultural factors." Action for the Rights of Children (2001-2021) also posits the firm view that there cannot be any universal definition of children. This is largely because childhood is both a cultural and social construct.

The seventeen children who participated in this research sometimes referred to themselves as "street children" but did not like to be classified as such. Thus, the researcher referred to them as children and often called them by their respective names. Using the perspective presented by Action for the Rights of Children (2001-2021) the researcher did attempt to coin a definition for street children. This was deliberate since the chief purpose of this research is to present their experiences and not try to categorize or even view them as different from the rest of citizens. To try to get their experiences of life is vital. Sofiya and Sitota (2019) states that: "Every day, I see these children either begging at the traffic intersections or working in the capacity of daily wage labourers, and I have always been curious about their perspective on life." It is important that people try as far as possible to understand how these children live. Sofiya and Sitota (2019) also state that: "...oftentimes, the question of how they deal with their lives and cope with grievous experiences – has plagued me."

Street life

The term "streets" does not exactly convey the same meaning for street children as it does for the public (Aptekar and Stoecklin 2014). For many street children the streets form an integral part of their life. It is on the streets that some of them make friends and find happiness. Aptekar and Stoecklin (2014) believe that they eat, sleep, and permanently dwell on the street. In summary they do almost everything on the streets.

It is important to note that street children live in a constant strive and battle to survive (Hills et al., 2016). They are utterly weak and vulnerable. This is largely because most of them live in dehumanizing physical environments. Some of them live in the marketplaces, bus terminals, rum shops, busy streets and at traffic intersections. Thus, they are prone to several risks and diseases. In addition, they are susceptible to various social hazards and diseases. Thus, it is not surprising that they become engulfed in all sorts of illegal

practices, like burglary, prostitution, the sale of drugs, and performing lewd acts (Ogunkan and Adebeyejo, 2014). Verma et al. (2020) conducted extensive research among street children in Delhi. She noted that: "It was found that approximately one-sixth of the children living at home and more than one-fourth of the street children were involved in the sexual behavior under the effects of the substance use." Derivois et al. (2019) conducted a research among street children in Haiti. They claim that despite the numerous adversities that surround street children they remain resilient. With great courage and tremendous fortitude, they continue to survive amid tribulations. This is a remarkable quality of street children.

Chowdhury et al. (2017) suggest that street children are susceptible to all types of abuses and exploitation. They endure tremendous oppression and work in perilous situations. Chowdhury et al. (2017) also believe that are often with disdain and scant courtesy. Action for the Rights of Children (2001-2021) add that: "Violent conflicts, severe socio-economic crises like displacement, distraction of normal life, and separation from family and/or community are crucial factors in causing lifelong effects on children."

Humanium-Together for Children's Rights (2011) think that the causes for the presence of street children are multifaceted. Some of these factors include family life, poverty, social and political issues. Although it is difficult to single out a particular cause, Humanium-Together for Children's Rights (2011) mention that: "Children who have been questioned say that family, poverty, abuse, war, etc. are often why they left for the streets." United Nations (2020) and United Nations Children's Fund (2015) admit that whenever there is a conflict or a crisis, children are affected the most because they are vulnerable. In this regard, they launch a strong appeal to end this crisis since children have a right to be protected. United Nations (2020) further states that on a global perspective, children are engaged in several types of activities.

WHO (2000) believes that this continuous exposure to dangerous situations makes street children defenseless and practically helpless to such degree that many of them engage in substance abuse, promiscuity and begging in order to survive. This type of illicit behaviour only seeks to diminish their mental, physical, social and spiritual wellbeing. Moreover, they live a transitory lifestyle and are susceptible to inadequate nutrition, physical injuries, substance use, and health problems including sexual and reproductive health problems. The Independent (2016) also supports this position. They are of the firm view that because street children are defenseless, they sometimes become an easy target into a life of sexual abuse, physical torture and even drugs and human trafficking. According to Raju and Sharmin (2016), this is because: "Extensive criminal networks make substantial profits by engaging children in commercial sex work, smuggling, stealing, and the distribution of drugs and weapons." This situation is further compounded since many of them have

limited educational opportunities while others are totally illiterate (Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman, 2016). Consequently, they are unable to make informed decision and take full control of their lives.

From the literature, it is abundantly explicit that street children often experience abuse of all types. They are vulnerable, oppressed and rejected. This type of scenario sometimes causes members of the public to discriminate against them and regard them as social outcasts.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study utilized a case study which incorporated semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaire. This case study also involved a cyclical process of data collection, reflection, and analysis. Semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaire provided a clearer understanding of the experiences of these seventeen children. Interviews and questionnaires were specifically selected because it was felt that they would allow these children to speak freely and without inhibition and thus, address the research question: What are your experiences of street life? To collect data the researcher chose times and days that were most convenient for the children.

Case study

As noted in the introduction, the main goal of this research was to arrive at an accurate and thoughtful insight of the experiences of these seventeen children. As a result, a case study was specifically selected because it was felt that it could provide a more comprehensive picture, deep insights and would be better able to investigate complex issues that were anchored in real-life situations (Yin, 2009). Case studies are holistic inquiry that principally seeks to investigate a specific phenomenon within its natural environment. Creswell (2018) holds the firm position that qualitative research is significant because researchers can explore and comprehend in greater detail what respondents convey. Likewise, Smith (1978, cited in Merriam and Tisdell, 2016) adds that case studies are also versatile and dynamic and provide a thorough and detailed examination of a phenomenon. Furthermore, they are intensive, and holistic. They also describe and analyse a single unit. Cohen et al. (2018) also describe case studies as an inquiry into precise scenarios within a real-life situation.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are suitable instruments for collecting data. This is chiefly so because they are flexible. Furthermore, researchers can capture nuances and non-verbal cues. They can also probe for better understanding, according to Cohen et al. (2018). Interviews are great data collection tools, but they are time consuming. They are susceptible to the bias of interviewers. They are also inconvenient for the interviewees and difficult to maintain anonymity. Keeping these issues in mind, the interviews addressed the social, academic, and emotional issues.

The interviewer used WhatsApp and Google Classroom and requested permission from the interviewees to make detailed notes of their statements during the interviews. The interviewer employed the qualitative thematic data analysis process offered by Creswell (2018). After interviews, data were transcribed and analyzed verbatim. They were also coded and arranged into themes. This was done with the research question in mind: What are your

experiences of life? First, they were transformed from word document into the Excel (Version 2014). Then, they were carefully analyzed, reviewed, and thoroughly read to accurately represent the voices of these children. They were finally documented into two major themes:

1. Listening: what it entails
2. Listening: sensitive and complex scenarios

Questionnaires

Open-ended questionnaires allow participants to freely express themselves and confirmed what was mentioned in the interviews. These children responded to questionnaires as deemed appropriate. They were not forced nor compelled to produce the "right" answer. The researcher maintained that getting their perspectives was far superior that whether or not they responded appropriately to the questionnaires. Creswell (2018) confirms that this instrument also allows them to state their perspectives and opinions objectively and unconstrained by any biases of the researcher or past research findings. Open-ended questionnaires are also cost effective and allow for structured responses. Therefore, they were chosen as an apt method of data collection and respondents were assured of anonymity. Open-ended questionnaires included areas that were related to their experiences of life. Cohen et al. (2018), together with Leedy and Ormrod (2018), mention that researchers ought to be aware of the various advantages and limitations of the use of questionnaires. Where there are advantages associated with this method, Cohen et al. (2018) hold the view that this instrument does not allow participants the ability to explain and develop their responses. Bearing this in mind, semi-structured interviews try to address this deficiency and simultaneously served to triangulate data (Connelly, 2016). Creswell (2018) noted that credibility is evident when researchers validate their findings. According to Denzin (1978, cited in Danny, 2014) triangulation is the use of more than one method to gather data, such as semi-structured interviews, and open-ended questionnaires.

The seventeen children

The children are all boys since girls are not permitted to stay at Sunshine. The girls are accommodated at other centers. These boys live at Sunshine intermittently since many times they return to continue to live on the streets. The ages range from 15 to 17 years. Most of them are unable to read, write, spell, and even speak properly. It must be mentioned that all seventeen spoke in the vernacular or used jargon. Their attendance at school is also infrequent. Sometimes they attend classes for a period of time with varying periods of interruption and thus, they seem to lack motivation for learning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The seventeen children for this research were purposely chosen from Sunshine in Trinidad and Tobago because they were readily available, accessible and willing to participate in this study. Their articulation of speech is extremely poor and some of them stammer and stutter and mispronounce many words. Prior to coming to Sunshine, they practically lived on the streets and from time to time continue to do so. Whenever they are at

Sunshine, they continue to go to school but even at that time their attendance is very sporadic.

It is extremely difficult and seemingly impossible to present accurate demographic information about these children. This is because most of the information that they provide often seem to be inconsistent and difficult to verify. Some of them were raised by their grandmother or an aunt. Some grew up with their respective mothers and stepfathers. For example, during interviews and questionnaires, they usually responded simply using one-word answers such as "yes," "no," "I don't know." Many times, in response to certain questions, they merely nodded their head to either indicate yes or no and avoided eye contact. Sometimes during the interviews there were short pauses as well as prolonged silence. They also took a long time to answer the questionnaires. In addition, they would either draw, use a symbol or write their names.

Although it was very complex and challenging to analyze and interpret their voices as well as their handwriting, integrity was always maintained. Many times, the data collected and analyzed were intertwined and this provided an excellent foundation for understanding their diverse experiences and culture. The analysis was presented in a narrative form. This reflected the ever-developing nature and the various components of their experiences. Data were collated, analyzed, triangulated, and documented in a narrative form with the use of two thematic headings: Listening: what it entails and listening: sensitive and complex scenarios. Sometimes the data collected and analyzed were intertwined and this also provided an excellent base for understanding their diverse experiences.

Listening: What it entails

Listening is an art. It is a skill. It is a discipline. It is a way of life. Listening does not mean giving advice and good counsel. It does not mean criticizing feelings. Listening does not try to solve problems and troubles. According to Delpit (1993), listening to young people is intricate and sensitive and it involves paying very close attention to their utterances. Listening is an integral part of the process in trying to understand the lives of adolescents. When young people feel that other are listening to them, they are more willing to communicate their thoughts, emotions, and feelings. As mentioned before, listening is very active and demanding process. Although it is difficult and demanding once it is done properly it can create and maintain positive relationships.

These six children from Sunshine underscore the significance of listening:

1. "Sir, we does be glad when yuh listen an'talk to we."
2. "We like it because we feel we learning something."
3. "Yuh cool with us."

4. "Dem odders an' dem only farse."
5. "When yuh started to talk wit we, we didn't use to trust yuh at all."
6. "Now we feel comfortable, and we could tell yuh anything."

Listening to the tone of children, and observing their manner of behaviour, in response to certain questions are critical. The emotional overtones demonstrated when some statements can be extremely helpful to researchers to clarify the perspectives of children. They did not only verbally express their sentiments but also documented them in response to the questionnaires. During this discussion, seven of them, different from the six noted above stated:

"Ah doh know wah Ah wan' to be, pause for about twelve (10) min."

Then another child continued:

"De studies an' ting too hard, pause, for about fifteen (15) min."

Another stated that:

"Ah, feel Ah iz Ah real failure in life, 'cause Ah fail de Science exams.

De work hard fuh so. (Another long pause). Ah, tink Ah want to work in a Chicken an' Chips Place, yes."

Similarly, this child mentioned that:

"Ah does study hard, but Ah does still fail all de exans an' ting."

In a very loud voice, this child remarked that:

"De English exams was hard fuh so. (He continued in a very soft tone, after a long pause of about twelve (13) minutes) "Ah sure Ah fail. Dat mean dat Ah car' be a policeman again."

Sharing about his career he noted that:

"Life hard fuh so, yes. But Ah, go continue to study hard an' Ah go be de bes' policeman in de country one day."

This child concluded that:

"Me ah know wh ah really want"

In the foregone examples the children claimed that although the studies were hard and difficult, they were brutally honest with themselves. Moreover, they were unafraid of expressing themselves even their failures. They admitted that they did not achieve well in their studies and are aware of the possible consequences that such a performance could bring.

Thus, the voices as well as their written scripts of these children clearly demonstrate that it is imperative that adults listen with a positive attitude. When this is done, it gives credit to the perspectives and voices of children. To listen with a positive attitude may include the following:

take proper notes, make frequent eye contact, and react with appropriate facial expression, give nonverbal cues and stay focused on the conversation. Sometimes adults may have to try to mentally paraphrase the salient issues and keep questions or points of disagreement until an appropriate moment. Most of all, adults should give prominence to the listening relationship and see it as an opportunity to learn.

Listening can expose adults to certain language usage such as: similes, metaphors, and idioms and assist them in understanding certain jargon that children use. Words like "hadded," "had was" and "uses" were used to convey the past tense of the verbs to have and to use. Words like "ting" and "ting nah" were used when there was an inability to elaborate on a particular issue. It was also usually used to describe personal, sensitive and delicate issues that relate to physical or sexual abuse. Sometimes, to describe a case of sexual abuse some children would probably state: "Meh fadder uses to do ting and ting nah wit meh." However, if they were describing a sexual encounter with a woman, they would not use the word "ting." They might more likely say: "Ah jam she good, or Ah gih she good it in she sweatbox or ah fxxx she." The word "sweatbox" refers to the vagina. Their description of sexual intercourse with a woman would be often accompanied with gesticulation of the body and with hand movement to be more explicit. During the questionnaires some of them depicted their emotions and feeling by drawing.

Therefore, to listen with heart and mind is more than being attentive and discreet. It is more than merely suspending morals and beliefs (Pervin et al., 2005). It is even more that mastering the jargon of children. Listening means being sincere, honest, truthful, and genuine. It means getting into children's lives and seeing the world from their perspective. Listening is a necessary tool in trying to fully comprehend the views and perspectives of adolescents. Consequently, more prominence ought to be given to this discipline. Too often listening is undervalued, underestimated, and oversimplified. In this contemporary society many adults are preoccupied with their jobs and personal pursuits. They sometimes have to work for long hours, and this could hamper and obstruct their capacity and enthusiasm for listening.

Although it is difficult adults should dedication more time and effort to listening to their children. Even if during this process the mind may wander adults should try to listen for a word or phrase that alerts attention. Although listening is difficult and demanding it must not be burdensome. Listening could incorporate the following: learning, relating, influencing, playing, and helping.

Listening: sensitive and complex scenarios

Giving an account of an experience with deep tremor in the voice can sometimes be a symptom of nervousness. One day, during conversation, this particular child began

to shake nervously, and he uttered something. It was too faint for me to hear, but I realized that something was bothering him. It seemed to be an extremely sensitive issue in his life. He eventually asked to speak with me in private. In a very soft tone of voice, he uttered: "It had, it had, it had (long pause) wen, wen, wen, we did, em, em, em, wen (very long pause) he, he, (very, very soft tone of voice)." As I was about to conclude the session, he shouted: "Ah eh finish talkin' to yuh yet, so weh yuh going." They he continued: "He, he, he is the kin ah feller (very soft tone) who, who, who is always, always (long pause) hugging yuh up (his head slightly bowed) and hugging yuh up an all kind ah ting an' ting." This experience made me realize the tremendous difficulty and great pain that some children experience when they try to explain something that is sensitive and complex.

Sometimes during interviews that concerned sensitive issues the children normally remained quiet for lengthy periods of time, sometimes from about forty-five (45) to fifty (50) min. After that prolonged silence they might start with comments such as: "Ah hate meh father," "police is de worse, yes, and "de farse and does only want to know yuh business." Such statements are clear indications that they have some animosity for their fathers or for some police officers. Sometimes the twelve children might ask general and seemingly unrelated questions such as: "Yuh like dem people who does live in dat kinda house?" or: "Ent it wrong to beat women an' ting?"

Very often, when they spoke about sexual abuse where a male person was involved, they usually assumed the following posture: head generally bent, hand usually in the face and the tone of the voice extremely low and incomprehensible at times. Frequent stuttering and display of rage and irritation often accompanied such delivery. Thus, listening to sensitive and complex issues often facilitated an appreciation that the meaning, emphasis and value that children attach to certain behaviours may be quite different from that of adults. Children are sometimes eager to share their testimony and experiences, but they do so if people are genuinely interested in them.

Therefore, the need to clearly understand what they want to convey must not be underestimated. Sometimes they may not be able to describe precisely what has happened because some of them may lack the necessary vocabulary. In Trinidad, to eloquently describe a case of sexual abuse and call certain parts of the body by their correct names are still sometimes associated with a high degree of shame and embarrassment. Furthermore, to call the private parts of the body by their proper names is often seen as "rude," "dirty" and "inappropriate." This occurs since children may feel embarrassed to speak about sexual abuse. Some of them may even view this as being "rude" or "inappropriate" activities. This scenario is heightened in cases where males abuse boys. In Trinidad, sexual abuse perpetrated against young boys is considered taboo and implies that something is wrong with the

perpetrator or the child.

In a small society as Trinidad, a breach of confidentiality could be very painful because it does not take very long for information to spread around the island. In this society, sensitive issues like abuse, especially among males, are viewed with a high level of disapprobation. Children are acutely aware of this taboo and to avoid being stigmatized they may prefer to say nothing. Thus, adults must not be unwilling to believe the stories of children until and unless investigation proves otherwise. Murray (2019) holds the firm view that: "...those who listen actively to children's voices come to know and understand the children's needs and interests..."

Conclusion

The researcher tried as far as possible to keep the focus and thus answered the research question: What are your experiences of street life? By adequately addressing the research question the perspectives and voices of these children were brought to the forefront. Action research afforded the researcher the great flexibility to interact informally with these children in their natural environment and it also allowed them to speak freely about their own experiences. The use of a combination of informal structured interviews and semi-structured questionnaires also permitted the researcher to maintain validity and readability. Data were collected, collated, triangulated, and documented in a narrative form using two major thematic headings: Listening: what it entails and Listening: sensitive and complex scenarios.

Thus, listening helps to identify properly: the needs, the feelings, the goals, the ideals and the vision of children. Listening also helps people to obtain a better and clearer understanding of the perspectives of children as they pertain to the: social, moral, ethical and educational issues and how these areas affect them. Most of all, listening can help in the formulation of recommendations and the consequent implementation of proper programmes. Listening will better inform governmental and non-governmental agencies who often construct programmes without the input of the people they are intended to help. Through the process of listening and discernment, social architects would be better able to design programmes that would meet the needs of children and thus, enhance the quality of their lives in some of the following areas: social life skills, literacy and numerical skills, coping strategies and spiritual development. It is strongly recommended that professionals and citizens should begin to listen carefully to the voices of these children.

Recommendations

From all that was stated the following recommendation is

suggested:

1. Policy makers ought to listen attentively to children.
2. Policy makers should incorporate street children in their decision-making process.
3. All citizens should heed the voices of children.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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