



Abstract

Rhizomatic Cartographies of Children's Lived Experience of Poverty and Vulnerability in Siaya, Kenya

Rhizomatic Cartographies of Children's Lived Experience of Poverty and Vulnerability is an interdisciplinary research on children's complex lived experience in Kenya. It is based on a one-year ethnographic research in Siaya, a county characterized by some of the lowest indicators of child wellbeing in Kenya. The research was guided by the key cartographical question, how is it both to be, and to be constructed as, a poor and vulnerable child in Siaya, Kenya? I took the rhizome, a Deleuzian imaginary for complexity, fluidity and interconnectedness as the conceptual, methodological, and organizing principle for my study. I explored the children's experience as 'cartography', or a rhizomatic map from three interlinked every-day and symbolic spaces of children. These are: the household/home, and non-state and state programmes of support and schooling.

Based on four main observations I demonstrate that contradictions suffuse the lived experience of children. First, due to poverty and associated vulnerabilities, children encounter challenges in enjoying their rights as citizens. Second, in the different spaces, children are targets of diverse interpretations and constructions of their identity and needs and these constructions influence their experience. Third, children and their caregivers draw on concrete, cultural and discursive strategies to cope with these constraints and constructions of their identity, rights and needs. They lay claims to their citizenship rights, but also perceive these rights as due from the state and a range of others. Finally, these strategies and sensibilities – themselves rhizomatic, in turn influence or become part of the cartographies of children's lived experience of poverty and vulnerability.

My research therefore reveals that children's lived experience is not linear. It is formed at sometimes enduring and/or shifting interstices of material lack and historically/politically located factors. It also forms at complex social relations, including community-individual and state-citizen relations and obligations. This experience coalesces at the context of representations and understanding of children's needs, rights and identity in programmes and the emergent agency of children.

These cartographical readings of children's experience were enabled by my theoretical intervention of 'listening softly to children's voice'. 'Listening softly' is a perspective that not only democratizes relations by giving children a voice but acknowledges children as knowing subjects. 'Listening softly' goes further to capture and draw implications for various dimensions of children's voice. Listening softly was enabled by my methodological orientation of a rhizome, and I therefore located children's voice as emergent in diverse contexts including locations of power. I also acknowledged that voice is multi-vocal and includes silence, the silenced and the unsaid. 'Listening softly' was supported by my diffractive reading of perspectives obtained through child-centred methods including narrative conversations, photo conversations, semi-autobiographical essays, creative drawing activities, Focus Group Discussions, children's diaries and my diffractive diaries.

From a policy and practice perspective, while it is clear that the findings of this contextual study are not necessarily applicable to other contexts, the mapping of the minutiae of children's experience provide useful perspectives on the entangled contextual nature of children's experience in general. However, I go beyond a perspective of simple contextual differences to an approach that reveals the

entangled fluid and contingent differences and idiosyncrasies within the specific setting of Siaya. Read this way, the research does not offer a blue print, but signposts for similar analysis and approach in different settings. The analysis can assist policy design and implementation agencies and actors in connecting and addressing better the nodes and processes that have a bearing on children's experience. In bringing to the fore competing interpretations of children's needs, I also call for a need to re-think support to children with attention to how specific support may foster vulnerability and point to spaces for alternative ethical and just solidarities when supporting children.

The complexity of children's experience challenges the linear, homogenizing and categorizing tendencies of child poverty research. I show that a rhizomatic reading of children's experience, that goes beyond measurements and shows the entanglement of fluid and contingent factors, exceeds multidimensional approaches to child poverty and vulnerability. Such an approach also anticipates complex solutions, avoids analyses that are linear, apolitical and ahistorical, and valorizes the voice of children.

My research also contributes to a call for childhood studies to re-think the voice of children beyond what children say, decentre the subject of childhood studies and re-imagine children's agency. It is presented at a time when there is a proliferation of research on deconstructing representations of children in policy and practice and especially the concept of an orphaned and vulnerable child. I engage in particular with the question, how can one deconstruct but still not lose focus on the wellbeing and rights of the child in critical, deconstructive research and studies?