Where the Sidewalk Crumbles: Children’s Own Experiences and Responses to Socio-Economic Adversities in Oracabessa, Jamaica

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Introduction

This report documents the research carried out for the PhD project, Where the Sidewalk Crumbles: Children’s Own Experiences and Responses to Socio-Economic Adversities in Oracabessa, Jamaica, from August 2003 – May 2004. It is being submitted in fulfillment of funding and program requirements to the International Development Research Council (IDRC), McMaster School of Graduate Studies and the McMaster Department of Anthropology. This document also acts as an account for the various stakeholders who participated in some fashion in the research of my activities. Given the fact that I am in the process of sorting, analyzing and writing, the findings discussed below are very preliminary in nature.

Background

Rationale and Research Question

Children were once thought to be sheltered from the political aspects of the “adult world”. Increasingly, there is a realization that all children everywhere are affected, and that those in developing nations often devastatingly so: 40% of all children in developing countries are living in severe poverty, surviving on less than $1 a day; 300 000 children are forced into military service; during the past ten years, over 2 million children have died and 6 million injured in wars; each year 1.2 million children are the victims of illegal trafficking, finding themselves trapped in some of the most awful forms of child labour, such as prostitution; currently, around 14 million children, ages 15 years and under, are orphaned due to the loss of one or both of their parents to HIV/AIDS (UNICEF 2000; UNICEF 2002). Clearly then, children feel the direct impact of politics in their daily lives. Kofi Anan, in The State of the World’s Children (UNICEF 2002), states that this year’s theme – child participation – is a reminder to adults to include children’s views when making decisions that will have an effect on their lives. Although child participation is firmly entrenched in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (2001), a document ratified by all but two countries (USA and Somalia), it is rarely enacted. Considering the impact of socio-economic adversities on the lives of children, seeking the input of those who are most vulnerable is a logical step.

Where the Sidewalk Crumbles: Children’s Own Experiences and Responses to Socio-Economic Adversities in Oracabessa, Jamaica is situated within this context of socio-economic adversity and child participation. It seeks to understand how the political is made personal through the examination of socio-economic adversities as experienced by children. The poet Shel Silverstein (1974) suggests that children are able to escape the limitations and adversities of the world by accessing a better place “where the sidewalk ends”. Although the poem “Where the Sidewalk Ends” is somewhat utopian in vision, I have chosen to employ this idea – with a slight modification to the title - because it reflects the correct notion that children have ways of dealing with the negatives, healthy or not, in their worlds. The second part of the research question is then, how do children respond to adversities? What skills do they use to deal with adverse conditions? Not all children experience adversities or respond in the same way, why is this? What “confluence of forces” (Duneier 1999) result in some children being able to deal relatively well, while others do not? What cultural beliefs and behaviours
affect how children respond to adversity? The third part of the research question focuses on the implications of socio-economic adversity on the inner development of children: How do these experiences affect their social interactions? How do these experiences affect how they perceive themselves?

Key Objectives

1. To understand how the political (global, national and local) impacts the lives of children.

Research gaps have been identified around the increasing number of socio-political issues that we recognize as shaping the way culture is experienced by children today. Global and national questions have been raised about how children experience, transform and resist the cultural politics of their daily lives (Schepher-Hughes & Sargent 1998; Stephens 1995). A primary theoretical objective in this project is to understand the varying ways in which children “experience, transform and resist the cultural politics of their daily lives”, with the goal of contributing to existing literature, while bettering current understandings of the impact of politics on children’s lives.

2. To contribute to understandings of children’s worlds.

The growing body of anthropological literature on children is wide ranging, covering diverse issues; however there is a lack of a substantive focus on children’s sub-cultural worlds (e.g., socialization, interactions with others, thoughts about political issues) (Hirschfeld 2002). This is a significant omission since enduring issues within anthropology are well addressed within such a context (Hirschfeld 2002). For example, such issues as sub-culture, behaviour, modes of learning, embodiment, and transformation are important not only to better understand children’s culture, but to understand how culture, more broadly, is reproduced, e.g., how people are enculturated in Jamaica.

3. To harness the creativity and insights of young children

One of the goals of this research is to provide a forum for children’s voices. The belief is that children are active agents in their own lives (Stephens 1995; Schepher-Hughes & Sargent 1998) and therefore should be able to provide input. Hirschfeld, in talking about the abilities of children, noted that children are not only adept at communicating with each other, but have also sufficiently mastered the “adult tongue” to convey and take in information from us. This requires some creativity, and insight into how adults function. I hope to tap into this because children may have a wealth of knowledge that just needs space for expression.

One of the main goals of this research is determining what kinds of strategies children may have to cope with adversities. My proposition is that there are likely strategies that adults do not recognize as such, and through discussion with children, I hope to discern what these may be. For example, Child (2000) has noted that children labelled as having Conduct Disorder may simply be expressing a form of resistance to the position in which they find themselves. In other words, what adults label as Conduct Disorder, some children may see as a way of coping with family/societal pressures.
4. To build upon ethnographic methods for conducting research with children.

Researchers have remarked on the methodological/ethical challenges children present because of their maturity level, cognitive abilities, language and competency (Smith 2002; Alderson 2000; Mandell 1988). This project employs a multi-layered methodological approach which will provide insight into approaches for working with children.

Ethnography has been noted as particularly appropriate and helpful with children (Prout & James 1997; Jenks 2000). This is based on techniques that focus on: 1) engagement; 2) participatory observation; 3) reflexivity; 4) flexibility; and 5) context (Eder & Corsaro 1999, Greig & Taylor 1999, Prout & James 1997). Although these are just a few of the features of ethnography, it is clear that such a method allows for children’s voices to be heard (Prout & James 1997). Ethnographic approaches also have the potential to access a significant diversity of lived realities for children (Hirschfeld 2002; Caputo 2001; O’Neill 2001).

The motivating force behind conducting this research is to increase the potential for providing “enabling” environments for children (Harper, Marcus & Moore 2003; Child 2000). A healthy, supportive environment nurtures children and allow for healthy, loving growth. The impact of “enabling” environments expands beyond the worlds of children, and indicates the direction of future societal developments: “Investment in children today is the best guarantee of equitable and sustainable development for tomorrow.” (UNICEF 2000). Towards this end are the following objectives:

5. To increase understanding about children’s experiences in socio-economic adverse situations
6. To examine the “confluence of forces” that result in some children coping well with adversities, while others do not.
7. To capitalize on the unique skills that children have and through this generate workable strategies for their well-being.

Research Location & Context

With a population of 2.5 million, Jamaica is the largest English speaking country in the Caribbean (Dunn & Mondesire 2002; Kirkpatrick 2002). It is a small island nation with a richly diverse landscape of “volcanic-formed mountains, fertile plains, rain forests, swamps, and a coastline that varies from rocky cliffs to white-sands” (CIDA 2002). However, despite such diversity, Jamaica remains one of the most indebted countries in the world (King 2001; Klak 1996). This situation is surprising given the hopes and expectations during the 1960s, when Jamaica experienced high rates of growth (King 2001). Unfortunately, Jamaica’s economic performance did not remain at such high levels, but, instead, fell steadily (Kirkpatrick & Tennant 2002; Klak 1996). The impact on Jamaicans can be seen in high rates of unemployment, deepening poverty and increased levels of violent crimes (National Committee on Crime and Violence 2002; McHardy 1999; Moser & Holland 1997).

The above statistics indicate that the social and economic conditions of cities and towns are worsening. Children under the age of 18 years account for about 39% of the total Jamaican
population (CIDA 2002; Dunn & Mondesire 2002). The conditions of the towns and cities in which these children live have a direct impact on their lives (Samms-Vaughan 2001; UNICEF 2002).

My research primarily took place in Oracabessa (see Figure 1), a small town of 4,200 (STATIN 2004) on the northeast coast of Jamaica. Oracabessa is situated within St. Mary, a mainly rural Jamaican parish. Rural regions in Jamaica tend to bear the brunt of poverty as compared to more urban areas (Handa 1994; CIDA 2002), with St. Mary being one of the poorest regions (North-East Regional Health Authority 2004). St. Mary also has a similar age distribution in the population, as compared to the country as a whole. Children under 15 years of age comprise 34% of the parish population (STATIN 2004).

With these facts in mind, I undertook research at two schools: The Rainbow Learning Centre and Oracabessa Primary School. The Rainbow Learning Centre (RLC) is a basic school, with children aged 2 1/2 - 6 years. It is a private school run by Domenica Higgins¹, a Montessori trained Directress. There were about 50 children enrolled, and for most of my time there three teachers, though, near the end of my project, they were down to two teachers, with aide from a few mothers. Oracabessa Primary School (OPS) has a student body of around 1200, with about 35 teachers.

Figure 1: Map of Jamaica

¹ Near the completion of my research, Mrs. Higgins was in semi-retirement, leaving much of the running of the school to the two teachers.
Conceptual Framework and Methods

As methods do not arise from nothing, but are initially informed by the conceptual framework within which the researcher is situated, it is important to discuss the theoretical currents within anthropology that resulted in the methods I selected, before I launch into a discussion of the specific methods themselves.

There is a growing movement within the Anthropology of Childhood that firmly situates children in the global arena, arguing for children’s participation in issues relevant to them, and noting that politics permeates their lives in complex ways (Scheper-Hughes 1998; Stephens 1995).

This project embraces the notion of praxis that engages participants in knowledge production that results in their participation at theoretical and applied levels of the research, and challenges the traditional power relationship between researcher and subjects (Warry 1992).

A multifaceted understanding of narrative is employed, where narrative is simultaneously the primary mode of communication but also is a vehicle for self-examination, resistance and subversion (Downe 2001; Leverick 2002; Monks 2000).

This research draws upon the theories of Critical Medical Anthropology and Social Suffering, wherein individual experiences are contextualized within broader, regional and global socio-political processes (Bourdieu 1999; Das 2001; Farmer 1997; Kleinman 1997; Singer & Baer 1995; Smith 2002). The questions explored in this research project also contribute to and make use of phenomenologically influenced approaches, such as Critical-Interpretivist (Lock & Scheper-Hughes 1990), which focus on the complexity and multi-layered nature of human experience.

The specific methods used then were: Participant Observation, Semi-structured Interviews, Focus Groups, and specifically developed techniques designed to fit the situation.

In Field Activities

Schedule of Activities

August 2003
- Arrive in Kingston, Jamaica
- Meet with Janet Brown, Sian Williams and other appropriate representative at Caribbean Child Development Centre
- Conduct library research about Oracabessa
- Arrive in Oracabessa, Jamaica
- Get acquainted with community
- Prepare for start of the school year
- Meet with teachers at the Rainbow Learning Centre (RLC)

September 2003
- Meet students and parents at RLC
- Send home information letters for parents at RLC
- Obtain consent for participation of the children in the study at RLC
- Meet with regional head of the Child Development Agency
- Continue library research
- Participant observe at RLC
- Try to make contact with Oracabessa Primary School (OPS)

October – November 2003
- Begin at OPS
- Participant observe at OPS and RLC
- Begin interviews at RLC

December 2003
- Focus group with teachers at RLC
- Prepare interview instrument for OPS
- Pilot it
- Continue participant observation at two schools
- Prepare parent questionnaire
- Pilot it

January 2004
- Send home consent forms for OPS children
- Continue with participant observation activities
- Begin interviews with OPS children

February 2004
- Continue with participant observation activities
- Continue interviewing OPS children
- Design interview instrument for government officials
- Contact government officials

March 2004
- Continue with participant observation
- Complete interviews at OPS and RLC
- End of research activities with RLC
- Begin interviewing government officials
- Continue with parent questionnaires

April 2004
- Finish up interviews with government officials
- Finish up questionnaires with parents
- Say good-byes

May 2004
- present preliminary findings at Canadian Anthropological Association conference in London, ON
Methodology

Based on my conceptual framework, I devised a tool-kit of traditional anthropological methods that I believed would best address my research questions. Some of the methods were then adapted for the particular context and individuals. As one of my goals was to "build upon ethnographic methods for research with children", I was particularly keen to learn what worked, what did not and invent new (and fun) ways of gathering information. I really enjoyed creating what I hoped would be better techniques and then putting them into play.

In this section, I will discuss the methods used and how they worked. In the next section, Preliminary Results, I will turn to a discussion of what I learned from the participants.

Participant Observation

The primary method utilized was Participant Observation (PO). As I explained from time to time in the field, this method gives the researcher an opportunity to become immersed in the social environment. It facilitates understanding, but also fosters interactions between the researcher and the participants. My goal was by participant observing on a daily basis, in all my interactions, be it with the children, or all others I came into contact with, I would have a context by which to interpret what the children then told me. So, PO took place in a number of locations, both formally and informally.

The two main formal locations were the Rainbow Learning Centre (RLC) and Oracabessa Primary School (OPS). In both these locations, I sat in the classrooms, often away for the action, observed and took notes. More often than not, at RLC, I also helped the teachers as well as worked with the children. I was able to do this at RLC often as compared to OPS because of its smaller size, and the structure of their classes. I did occasionally interact with the children in the classroom at OPS however. Mainly this took the form of helping them with their work, when they requested. I also occasionally participated in classroom activities. At the outset of this project, I spent everyday, for one month, at RLC; then, once I began at OPS, I spent around three days at OPS, and two days at RLC.

While at OPS, I discovered the need to explain my presence in the classrooms. I took this opportunity to present a little story about myself, about anthropology, and explain to them why I was so interested in speaking with them. This generally took the form of an oral presentation, lasting around five minutes (depending on the number of questions I was asked afterwards). I did also turn my presentation into a story for the grade two students, one that they could read along with me.

PO took place in other locations aside from the school setting, and were informal. The particular locations depended, for the most part, on where the children were. Observations then took place just outside the school compound, where a few children would gather to play marbles, or sit and chat and various other locations that I was lead to by the children themselves, such as one of the local beaches. I would gather sea-shells and chat there with a group of children on a semi-weekly basis. I also attended church. Very quickly it became apparent that religion, Christianity for the most part, played a very important role in the lives
of adults and children alike. As a result, I attended a few churches in greater Oracabessa area.

Interviews

All the interviews I held were semi-structured, in that I had a series of questions to ask, but was willing to follow where the participant was leading. The goal was not to quantify my answers, but to make a qualitative assessment of my key objectives.

RLC

I began with the 5 – 6 year olds at RLC. Because of their age, I chose to interview them in groups of roughly three to four. Although by the time I began with their interviews, the children had come to know me fairly well, I was concerned that the new situation of being one-on-one – in a formal feeling context – might intimidate them. I attempted to match children I knew related well to each other, and also aimed to make the interviews as interactive as possible. This I did by engaging them in crafts, while conducting the interviews. During the first series of interviews, I had them make friendship bracelets: one for themselves and another for a person they would choose themselves. During this activity, we would discuss the meaning of friends, and relationships in general. I found, however, that the activity was, for the most part, distracting in nature. Much of the conversations were about decisions with the manufacturing of the bracelets. However, that being said, I was able observe how the children interacted with each other, as well as listen to the casual conversation that took place while they did they did their crafts.

Because I was given very open permission to interview the children and interact with them as much as I wanted, I chose to interview the RLC children on more than one occasion. During the next series of interviews I chose to interview them without crafts. This worked out somewhat better. The main problem, however, during this later interview, was the new location in which the interview was taking place. We were in a room typically out-of-bounds to them because their kindergarten room was under construction:

I also attempted to interview two individuals separately. I knew these two boys to be from troubled backgrounds, shy, and sometimes aggressive. I found that they did not talk during the group interviews so hoped that by interviewing them individually I would have a better chance of eliciting a response. I was wrong. They were very nervous, and I had to stop both interviews.

I learned much from my RLC experience, because I experimented, and had the opportunity to change things as a result of the repeated interviews. One point that was reinforced for me, however, was that the researcher really does need to allow the children to lead the interview. There are still ways to facilitate the form, but the content should be, if possible, directed by the children themselves.

OPS
At OPS, I interviewed children individually. I used a semi-structured interview instrument, one that was designed based partially on my PO and on my key objectives. I tested my instrument on the first two interviewees, who were interviewed over the Christmas holidays. These interviews took roughly two hours each, which was too long for the children to sit through and also too long for the time constraints I would be under in the school setting, so I edited and adjusted the questions.

Children were selected based on my notes made during my observation of each class. I conferred with the teachers and either kept those I had initially chosen, or selected others according to their recommendation. The interviews themselves took place during an acceptable time during the school day; one that worked the best with the teacher’s schedule. I interviewed children at school because it was the best place to ensure some privacy.

The interviews were a mixed bag of techniques. I tended to tailor, on an ad hoc basis, according to the needs/skills of each child. This meant that I would follow their leads, and adapt my questions accordingly. Certain activities would not be used, depending on their likes/dislikes or focus of the interview. For example, I may not ask them to draw if they clearly did not like doing so. In addition to direct answer questions, I also created scenarios, asked “what if” questions, sentence completion, and wishful thinking/imaginations exercises. I also showed them a series of laminated colour cue cards, with the direction to tell me what they were feeling or thinking when they saw each one.

At the end of each interview, each child was given a thank-you gift. This gift included different items such as, pencils, erasers, sharpeners, stickers, cars, hair baubles, and a notebook which will be discussed below.

Because I had an assortment of methods, I believe I was able to address the needs of a number of children. That being said, however, if I could do it all over again, I would not choose to interview a number of children once; rather, I would interview a few children repeated times. I found that children were not always sure whether or not they could trust me, or were still shy with me, despite having interacted with me outside the interview. For example, one young girl hardly spoke during our interview. I met up with her at a youth group one evening and she came to sit beside me. The interview had demonstrated to her that I was not all that scary. Although she was not chatty with me, she did, by body language, and a few words, suggest that she would speak with me if interviewed again. I, unfortunately, did not have the time to test this. In addition, repeated interviews would have provided me the opportunity to explore particular issues to a greater depth.

I would also videotape interviews, if I had a chance to redo this project. I found that I could not capture all the gestures and body movements the children made during the interviews because I was busy paying attention to what they were saying. This sort of information can be invaluable when assessing their responses, and also their lack of response.

Stakeholders

I also held semi-structured interviews with professionals in the fields of child services. I conducted semi-structured interviews with government officials from education, child services
and guidance counseling. I also interviewed child psychologists. I was aided greatly in my selection by Janet Brown, the then Director of the Caribbean Child Development Centre. She provided suggestions of people I should interview, and also wrote me a letter of introduction to validate my interview requests.

I must report about the relative ease with which I was able to set up these interviews! Everyone I was able to reach\(^2\) initially agreed to be interviewed. Only one person had to back out, as she changed positions before our interview could take place.

These interview fit within the larger project in a few ways: 1) they provided a background and context by which to understand the social and policy environment in which children are socialized; 2) they added insights into the reality of the situation (which I learned from the children) and the idealized or intended situation (which I learned from policies). My goal was to gain information that links the social with the political, the local with the national and children with policy.

I also interviewed the principal\(^3\) and the guidance counselor of OPS. These interviews were also fairly easy to set up, and were conducted for much the same reason as I held the interviews with the government professionals.

The interviews went well, despite the post-interview discovery that not all interviews were recorded properly. Fortunately, I took notes in all interviews. I have also had these interviews transcribed, so will being analysis of them shortly.

**Focus Groups**

**Teachers**

I initially planned on holding focus groups with only the teachers. The reason I held focus groups for teachers was to access knowledge and insight teachers would have about children and their environment, since they work with students five days a week. The focus group was, the chosen method because it allows for discussions in a highly interactive setting; it provides the teachers with a chance to feed-off each others' ideas. I held one focus group for all three teachers at RLC. We met during the school break at Christmas time, for around 2 hours. Scheduling was a little harder with the teachers at OPS, so, as they suggested, we met over two ½ hour lunch breaks. I met with around 5 teachers for a maximum of 1 hour.

Both focus groups, at RLC and OPS, were highly informative. Despite the brevity of OPS, I was able to obtain a lot of useful and interesting insights into issues that I could only see superficially. The RLC focus group was also provided insights, and set me off into different directions in terms of how to better interact with children in Jamaica.

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\(^2\) I was not able to reach one stakeholder, and that was simply because she was on leave, returning around the time I was departing.

\(^3\) I did not formally interview Domenica Higgins at RLC because we were in constant communication, and I was able to ask her questions on a regular, informal basis.
Children

Focus groups were also held with primary students, and were initiated by the children themselves. A number of children requested to be interviewed. I think this was partially driven by the thank-you gifts I gave to each child I interviewed, but also the novelty of being interviewed (and the compliment of being singled out). As I could not hold as many individual interviews as I had requests, I suggested that whoever wanted to be interviewed take part in a focus group. Each focus group was held over one lunch hour, lasting about 45 minutes. The focus groups were based on a highly edited version of the interview instrument. As with the primary school teachers, the time for these focus groups was simply not sufficient. I found that I had to constantly be cutting the children off because the time was not there for in depth discussion. This was terribly unfortunate because the children had a lot to say, and a lot of very interesting points to make. I had to get them back to their classes on time, however, so simply could not go over time.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires were completed with the parents because, as stated before, when assessing a child’s world, it is necessary to access other forms of information. I filled out questionnaires and short answer questions with the parents with the hope of gathering information on the family situation of each child so that I could better understand what was said during their (child’s) interviews. As well, information parents give can provide a richer picture of the social environment in which children live.

The questions then were divided into sections about family, being a parent, religion, and a final section where I just asked them general opinion questions. The length of the questionnaire varied a fair bit, depending on how forthcoming the individual parent was. Almost all of the questionnaires were completed at the parents’ residence. I did not want to make the parent have to come out of his/her way to meet with me, so took the opportunity to visit with him/her, in a known, comfortable environment. This also gave me the chance to see the area in which each child resided, as well, as introduce me to a number of smaller local communities.

Notebooks

At the end of the interviews I gave each child a notebook to keep as a semi-personal diary. They were told that they could write or draw or put into it anything they wished. They were also told that they did not have to share it with anyone and that I would be collecting them before I left for Canada. In other words, they were told that these were not completely private documents. I did tell them, however, that I would not identify them with the material they wrote, so no personal identification would be made. A handful of children who were not interviewed asked for notebooks as well. I also gave one to any who asked for a notebook.

The purpose of the notebooks was to give children another outlet to express themselves. I was hoping these “diaries” would allow the children a freedom to express what was on their minds, without the worry of (direct) censure.
I did not gather back as many as I handed out, and many of them did not have much written or drawn in them. The others, however, were filled with pictures, stories, songs, magazine cut-outs, etc. Analyzing these notebooks may prove to be a great deal of fun for me!

Challenges to Methods

Although, for the most part, my methods worked well, there were, of course, challenges and problems. The most obvious one, which was expected, was my being an adult. I had thought this would present a fair bit of difficulty, but was pleasantly surprised to find that it was not as debilitating as I had thought. I did find however, that a number of children treated me like a teacher. They were willing to tattle about others to me, show me their work, and confide non-essentials. There was hesitancy in completely trusting me, as I had not proven myself, I expect. The promises I made, I feel, some of them expected me to break, or where not sure I would keep.

I also found that my adultness was a problem for me, in that there were times I felt like, well, they were children, and not research participants. It was hard to shake the role of treating them as children, although I was very much conscious of wanting to learn from them. What this meant was that I was slow on the uptake, sometimes, because I would subconsciously dismiss their insights as childish prattle.

My foreignness was a blessing and a curse. I was interesting to the children because I was a Jamaican “from foreign”. This held a fair bit of appeal, on one hand, but on the other, it meant that I was seen as different and/or interesting – not a chum. This resulted in special treatment, which sometimes interfered with creating bonds.

Changes in the Field

Soon after I arrived in Oracabessa, it was suggested that I do my research at one of the Children’s Homes in Jamaica. Children’s Homes are similar to orphanages, where children who have suffered abuse, abandonment or just needed to be removed from their parents, are placed. I was told that there was a Children’s Home in St. Mary, by the name of Pringle Home for Children, which would be suitable. I thought this was a good suggestion, and looked into the feasibility of conducting research there. I met with the supervisor of the Home, and was told that I needed permission from the administrator of the Home. By the time I was able to get in touch with this person, some time had passed. I was denied permission in the end, because, I believe, of fears concerning the nature of my research. Pringle Home had been in the news and under scrutiny because of a high profile sexual abuse allegation. I believe they were concerned that I would be evaluating the quality of the care they gave, and yet again bring negative attention to their Home.

During the latter part of my time in Jamaica, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Culture was undergoing changes in reference to their vision for education. In order to involve the public in these changes, a series of roundtables were held across the country. I attended one in Runaway Bay, a town about 1 ½ hours from Oracabessa. The focus of these round tables was to elicit ideas and thoughts towards “Transforming Education: a new vision for education
during the 21st century”. The round table discussion was interesting, but, as it was a visioning exercise, there was no room for discussions around implementation, and feasibility.

Preliminary Results

As seen from the table below, I was able to conduct a number of interviews, the preliminary results of which will now be discussed in reference to my research objectives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child Interviews</th>
<th>Child Focus Groups</th>
<th>Teacher Focus Groups</th>
<th>Parent Questionnaires</th>
<th>Stakeholder Interviews</th>
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<td>58</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>8</td>
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Research Objectives

Were my objectives realized? The easy answer is, for the most part, yes. I was able to address the objectives I brought into the field, and did find them appropriate/useful. How well they were addressed is something that will only become clear with time, and completion of my analysis. In this section, I will use the objectives as a way to organize some of the observations I made.

To understand how the political (global, national and local) impacts the lives of children.

To increase understanding about children’s experiences in socio-economic adverse situations.

I entered the field with the bias, well grounded in literature, that children are impacted by the political decisions swirling around them. This was clearly seen in a few basic and superficial ways. During the interviews, I showed the children a cue card of PJ Patterson, the Prime Minister of Jamaica; almost every single child knew who he was, and had some opinion about him. As well, most children were aware of who President Bush was and of the conflict in Iraq (and had opinions about it too). Children were also aware of local and community political machinations as well. Some of this is the result of, I believe, the openness in which many parents communicated their views to their children (or at least in front of them).

To see the impact of the political on the lives of children in more indirect, but very much embodied ways, I listened to the stories they told me and watched their interactions with each other.

I found that children were generally very well aware of their relative poverty, and the financial status of those around them. Despite this, or, perhaps, as a result of it, children often attempted to mask it. One way of doing this was to keep up appearances, for example, ensure that you always had money for your lunch, and not bring a packed lunch to school.
One mother told her child to find a place to hide to eat her packed lunch, where the other children would not see her, and thus not tease her. Other children would often show their peers how much money they had with them that day, in an almost bragging manner.

I was walking with a young girl (Julie) once, when her classmates called out to her, and laughed at her. I asked this young girl what was wrong, and she mumbled something about them laughing at her clothes. I then looked at what she was wearing and noticed that her shirt was torn, and her clothes were in a general state of disrepair. Julie told me that she often wears her school uniform outside of school hours because no one teases her then. Appearance is very important, as it is a way to overcome, or better disguise the reality of one’s situation.

Appearance has also much to do with what one wears. Appearing in clean, properly fitted clothing is nice, but having name brand items is even better. Children talked about Timberland® shoes and other expensive items that they wanted to obtain, because of status associated with these objects. Acquiring such objects was outside the realm of possibility for most children⁴, but not outside the realm of imagination.

I found that children used their imaginations a fair bit. At first, I noticed, and thought children were creative, making good use of something everyone has, no matter the class or the finances. After a while, I realized that their imaginative play was a way to envision, and live in, if only for a moment, a reality unlike their daily experiences. It was a way of mitigating the poverty of their existence, denying the injustice of their social location, and perhaps, a way to cope with the reality of their lives, without being overwhelmed. For example, one boy, Adrian Jr. fabricated much about his family during our interview. He was very believable, and I did not question his story until I met his mother for the parent questionnaire. I realized that despite his relative wealth in comparison to his counter-parts at OPS, he was aware of what he did not have. As an intelligent boy, this disconnect between his reality and what he wants was perhaps best solved by imagining a new one while in conversation with me. It was a perfect opportunity to pretend he was the boy he wanted to be.

There are many more examples I could provide. Examples of how children strategically told imagined stories about certain aspects of their lives because they were embarrassed about the reality; of children who told stories so clearly fantastical you wondered about their capacity to distinguish reality from fiction. Common to all of these imagined stories however, is the form of escapism they offer the tellers.

Kleinman (1997) noted that there is a need to “examine the most basic relationships between language and pain, image and suffering”. I believe that by examining the relationship between the stories the children told, and their social situation, we can see the link between suffering and imagination.

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⁴ There are many cases of children, often young girls, engaging in illegal, or unsafe activities in order to put together enough cash to purchase such status items. For young girls, this often means finding an older man who will provide money for school, but also luxury extras.
By understanding poverty, the larger problem in these children’s lives, as a form of social suffering with its concomitant hardships, we can then understand their imaginings are a way for them to transform and mute their embodied signs of a wider social distress.

Other issues of interest under this objective that arose during my fieldwork were slavery and shadism. Although the days of slavery are now part of history, the concept and metaphor of slavery lives on. It was a term that was used with a variety of different meanings, in a variety of different contexts, frequently. Strangely though, when I showed the children a cue card of a scene of slavery during interviews, most of them did not know what it was about. I am not sure how to interpret this as yet, except perhaps to suggest that slavery has so transformed itself in the minds of children, that it no longer is necessarily tied to its original meanings. Slavery is associated with history, which is clear by how this term is used, but perhaps it has gained validation in contemporary societies, so much so that former scenes of it simply do not correspond with children’s current understandings.

Also, shadism, was an important part of the children’s discourse. It was an important part of their interaction with me, because I was variably called “white” (because I am Western I believe, but also have a lighter skin tone than some), or identified as a “coolie” (East Indian). It is also an important part of self-identity, self-esteem and self-worth. Whiter skin is associated with more money, better job opportunities and an over all better life. Children, of all ages, would often comment on their skin colour, or associate beauty with those who had “pretty skin”.

To contribute to understandings of children’s worlds.

My research is very much about this objective. I am not in a position, as yet, to comment greatly on my findings in this area, except to point out that all the other objectives work towards generating a more complex, and holistic understanding of children’s worlds. What I did finding intriguing when I was conducting research was the incredible overlap in children’s and adult worlds; the intimate ways in which these two worlds touched on each other; the blurring of the margins of childhood and adulthood. Despite this however, and as was also clear from PO, adults and children were rather distinct, and adults definitely had definite views about the limitations of childhood.

To harness the creativity and insights of young children.

To capitalize on the unique skills that children have and through this generate workable strategies for their well-being.

Paramount to achieving this objective, I have discovered, is learning to listen differently. There is much that we as adults automatically categorize as useless, cute, or simple juvenile reasoning. I have found that by stepping outside of our adult centered, adult oriented worlds, we have access to invaluable resources. An example of this is my discussion of imagination above. I took a little while to realize that some of these children were using their imagination
in ways that I had simply been interpreting as childish fantasies; that their imagination was precisely the type of coping mechanism I was in search of!

To build upon ethnographic methods for conducting research with children.

I have, I believe, added to the repertoire of methods available for use with children, not so much by generating never before heard of methods, but by combining approaches and techniques, and by having a fairly flexible and wide-ranging series of ways of work with children. The constant editing I referred to in my discussion of interviews was driven by each individual child. This focus on being led by children also resulted in child initiated methods, such as conducting focus groups for children.

It was very important to ensure, in attempting to design child-friendly methods, that the children were not disempowered during the process. One way of maintaining some sense of empowerment was having them sign, or at least verbally consent to being interviewed. I used assent forms as a means to let them know they had a choice; if they did not want to be interviewed, they could choose not to be. I spent some time at the beginning of each interview explaining this. No child ever told me straight out that they did not want to be interviewed, but, as an interviewer, it became clear when this may be the situation, so I would check with them again, reiterating the fact that no one needs to know their decision, and that they would not be adversely affected by choosing to terminate the interview. A few children chose (directly and in-directly) not to be interviewed.

To examine the “confluence of forces” that result in some children coping well with adversities, while others do not.

Based on interviews and observations, children were able to deal better with adversities when they could fall back on their family and God. It seems when their family, or a particularly important family member, was not around (perhaps absent through migration), the children had a much harder time of managing. This is very preliminary in nature, and begs further investigation because of the complex relationship children have with God and their family.

Conclusion

Conducting research in Jamaica was a particularly unique experience for me, as I am Jamaican by birth. Having left the country as very young child though meant that there was much I did not know, and as would be the case with anyone else, I needed to learn, to become better acculturated. However, my Jamaican heritage provided me with insights, and understandings that would not have been easy to come by if it were a truly new culture for me. The added dimension to this benefit is the personal frustration and challenges I experienced because as I was gathering more information for my project, I was also learning more about myself; how I fit (or did not) into Jamaican culture. I put these frustrations to work, but channeling them towards asking better questions, and better understanding the experiences of the average Jamaican. My link to Jamaica, and frustrations and joys I went through in learning more about my research while discovering more about myself, has
guaranteed an ongoing, and vibrant connection with my project as well as a vested interest in ensuring that results of my project are fed back to the community.

This report represents the field work undertaken for my PhD degree. The findings are very preliminary in nature, but highlight some of the issues and challenges I will face in analyzing the results. The final product will hopefully illuminate the resources children have that often lay hidden from adult eyes.

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