

Researching with Children's Voice Challenges in the Field

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Abstract

The study looked into the contested notion of childhood and its implications for research conducted with children. It located the view of childhood as socially constructed (James and Prout 1997), and delved into the world of street children who stayed in a non-government, non-custodial, voluntary and comprehensive care children's home in north Delhi. The objectives of the study were to grapple with the theoretical and methodological tensions of engaging in a non-invasive dialogue with the culturally different children in order to locate agency in children's voice. These voices were heard in the 'free spaces' within the institution to minimise the structural constraints imposed by formal spaces. The findings of the study revealed the methodological research challenges including children's ability to withdraw from situations due to the researcher's proclivity to under or overestimate the choice of tools. It also showed how children constantly engaged, reflected, manipulated and guarded themselves in their social worlds and brought forth the need to understand these negotiations within similar spaces in the formal school context, in addition to observations within the classrooms, to understand the agency in children's voice.

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Introduction

“Mera bhai kehta hai ki tu anaath hai. Mujhe hansa aati hai.” (My brother says I am an orphan. I feel like laughing.) This was an expression of 11 year old Ruksaar who was one among the seventy-five girls staying together in a children’s home run by a non-government organisation that works for the safety, security and education of the most vulnerable, urban-poor in Delhi. Ruksaar and many other girls like her decided to stay here, separated from their siblings and parents. Their decision to stay in a children’s home reflected a larger problem on the oppressive social and economic hierarchies that children like her and their communities inhabited in the urban developments.

These Children under Especially Difficult Circumstances (CEDC) were homeless, abandoned, orphaned, delinquents or in conflict with the law. Vulnerable, marginalised, destitute, neglected and frequently deprived of their basic rights to family care, protection, shelter, food, health and education they were more prone to physical and mental abuse besides being involved in hazardous work in unsafe working conditions. Even in such difficulty, they have aspirations from education and want to study as shown in a survey which reported that of the 49 per cent street children who were literate “23 per cent had received some form of formal education (13%

up to pre-primary, and 2.4 per cent up to middle school)” (Bhaskaran and Mehta 2011, p.8).

In this case, Ruksaar along with other participants of the study also had aspirations from education which is why they decided to live away from their families in the children’s home. Their decision to exit from the streets, to live in the children’s home prompted us to understand how, staying together in this home away from their homes, they took decisions for themselves and invented, understood and guarded their social worlds. We wanted to experience the inherent dynamism in the children’s social worlds through this study, by taking children’s voice as the starting point of our research. We engaged reflectively with three children spread over a period of one month in a unique setting where we immersed ourselves in the setting to understand the vocabularies and context of children and engaged in dialogue with children in a perspective display sequence (Rapley 2007). This meant that we let the children talk and asked them questions relevant to our focus area wherever we found an opportunity to do so.

To explain how and why we engaged in dialogue with children and how it connected to agency in children’s voice we explicate the construct-‘children’ and reflect on our vantage point of the term. We then, look at the methodological and analytical aspects of ‘exploring the agency in children’s voice in a Home away from home’.*

*[P.S.: The term ‘Home’ is used for the home where children stay and the ‘home’ is for their parental homes.]

Children – The Construct

Viewed independently, children are conceptualised as bestial, savage, tabula rasa and, even innocent and pure by theorists. When juxtaposed with the term 'adult', the term 'children' becomes paradoxical as, on the one hand children are considered to be naïve; in need of constant adult supervision and on the other, they are considered to be sharp in looking for alternatives. One reason why such paradox occurs is that we view children from an adult eye. (Alanen, 2010; Fine and Sandstrom, 1988; Jenks, 2005; Waksler, 1986)

One notices such paradoxical use of the term in readings about children. One such instance is Rousseau's *Emile* where he says,

Nature wants children to be children before they are men. If we deliberately pervert this order, we shall get premature fruits which are neither ripe nor well-flavored, and which soon decay...

(Rousseau cited in Jenks, 2005, p.3)

The reason why children are seen as children before they are men is because theorists conceptualising children have normative concerns of how children become adults. Chris Jenks views such adult concerns as hegemonic. One can see such hegemony in education too, as education is informed by theories of socialisation and developmental psychology which view child as premature; dependent upon adults for psycho-social development. Parsons

cited in Jenks 1982; Piaget cited in Waksler 1986). These normative concerns of the adults undermine the children's voice which emphasises children's agency and participation in the social world.

Another point of concern is that children are taken to be natural and universal though they live and grow in particularistic socio-cultural contexts which are unique to them. The problem with naturalness is that adults have been children in the past themselves and they consider their own world-view of children to be as authentic as the world view of children themselves. There are theorists, who suggest that the 'processes with which children and adults make sense of the world are similar'. They believe that, 'The different worlds do not teach lessons that are in conflict, but rather they co-operate to teach the skills, attitudes, values and beliefs that are appropriate for the life at the time and also are a good preparation for later on.' (Sluckin cited in Fine and Sandstrom, 1988, p. 57) There are others however, who emphasise that the sets of meanings and values of children are distinctly different from adults. "In addition to suggesting that children are competitive interpreters in the world" they suggest that, "they are in possession of their own culture or succession of cultures." (Robert MacKay cited in Fine and Sandstrom, 1988, p.57) These two stances represent the "fluctuations between the normative and analytical register" (Alanen, 2010, p. 5) and are

common to researching children's voice. Though there are fluctuations between the analytical and normative approaches in research with children, the researchers commit (normatively) to improve children's position and valuation in the society by endorsing children's voice as a starting point of research. (King, 2007)

Doing Research

When listening to children's voice, the researchers have to take into account that children inhabit two sets of cultures— one that belongs to them and the other, created by adults. Also, children are quick to swap from one culture to another as they are “highly fluid and capable of rapid change and creativity” (Davies cited in Tammivaara and Enright 1986, p. 234) therefore it is crucial for the researcher to define his/her role in a study prior to entering children's social world. Since, in the present case, we were looking for agency in children's voice in the culture that belonged to them, we assumed the role of a friend (positive contact and low authority) and embedded ourselves into the setting to understand,

- How to engage in non-invasive dialogue with children and to
- Explore the agency in children's voice.

As we wanted to observe and study children closely, we chose a setting where children were a segregated social grouping and had more scope of mixing with each other. This was a children's Home in Delhi. It was

easy for us to gain access into this setting as we knew Junaid (one of the coordinators) of the NGO- Zindagi. He referred us to Seema, coordinator of the North Delhi Home. We spoke with her over the phone. She told us to meet anyone from the organisation to understand the nature of their work before meeting the children. We were however keen to meet the children so we asked her if we could get acquainted with them. She agreed saying that we will not be able to resist talking to the children as ‘they are free and not caged.’ So, eagerly we went, the next day, to locate the Home in North Delhi. When we reached the metro station, we asked the locals about the address and spent some time reaching it as it was located deep inside the market.

Into a Home Away From Home

We reached there to find an old bungalow with a large courtyard in the front. The entrance had a large iron gate tied with a chain. We undid the chain and went inside to meet the house-manager. We told her we had talked to Seema and wanted to see the Home. She promptly took us around and showed us the office and the rooms upstairs. As she walked with us, children (4-11 year olds) huddled around her to see the strangers. As she was showing us around, she got a call from Meena (the other coordinator whom we had not spoken to before coming) who got suspicious of us and spoke to us sternly over the phone. It was when we told her we

had sought permission before coming to the Home that she was agreeable and offered to meet us the next week when she told us about the North Delhi Home.*

Sketch of North Delhi Home



Fig. 1: Photo courtesy: Shabnam, a resident of North Delhi Home

Zindagi, the NGO that runs this Home to provide care, protection and education to the children was a joint endeavor of the Delhi government under the broad umbrella of the government programme 'Bhagidari' and more specifically under the government enrolment drive, 'School Chale Hum' campaign to ensure education as a matter of Right (MHRD 2008). The program, with its belief in equity, planned to work with the most vulnerable population in Delhi. This population was identified as the children on the streets of Delhi. This program was planned in two phases:

Phase 1: Building relationships with children and

Phase 2: Working for their betterment in terms of providing a Home for security, protection and education.

The NGO appointed fieldworkers to map the city and prepare a profile of the population, community's occupations and their problems to get a realistic picture of the magnitude of homeless children. After careful mapping they identified the needy children, built trust with their parents, talked to them to let their children stay in the homes. An MoU was signed with the Delhi government on the following three issues:

- (1) Buildings to serve as RBC (Residential Bridge Course)/ RSTC (Residential Special Training Centers) to be provided by the government.
- (2) Government would provide ₹ 6800 per child per year which was later raised to ₹ 19,200 per child per year and
- (3) Government would provide help in case of problems in seeking formal admission to government/private schools

This 'Home' was one such building provided by the government. It had 75 girls, 2 coordinators, 3 house-mothers, 2 teachers, 1 security guard and 1 cleaner. Of the 75 girls, about 95 per cent had parents who came to take them home on holidays and festivals which is why we called it 'a Home away from home'.

*[P.S.: The names of organisation and persons have been changed to mask their identities.]

These children were brought in by the consent of parents (through a legal system) for security and education as they were beggars and rag pickers with little or no schooling. Some of them were rescued as domestic labour from homes through CWC (Child Welfare Committee)*.

Some of the children (about 35) from this Home were attending formal schools. For those who were not enrolled in schools, they were enrolled in the residential bridge course under the SSA Scheme of the government (under the *School Chale Hum* campaign) for enrolling children who were out of school (GoI 2004).

Knowing the Children

Once we knew about the Home, we were interested to know the children. As we wanted to understand the children's views in-depth we decided to focus on three children (two 11 years old and one 12 years old). This was a pre-adolescent group. We chose this group as it was here, that children began to explore the ways in which they could fit into the society. At one level, they thought of who they were, and at the other, how people thought of them in a societal frame of reference. They were not

closely monitored by their parents or guardians (more so in this case where they had little parental control or constant adult supervision.) (Weigert, Teitge and Teitge 1986).

We spoke to Ruksaar (11 years old), Rehaan (11 years old) and Pooja (12 years old). Before detailing how we engaged in dialogue with them we would like to give a portrait of the three participants which was constructed after talking to Meena and the three children themselves.

The Three Children

Ruksaar was eleven years of age. The fieldworkers came to know of her from Rehaan's mother (Rehaan was also a participant in this study). She had five sisters and four brothers. Her mother was ailing and her brothers consumed drugs. They abused her mother. Before joining this Home, she was engaged in rag-picking.

Rehaan was also eleven. She preferred to call herself Reena as she did not like her name. She was in this Home since the last two years. Before coming here, she was with her mother in Bawana and was also engaged in rag-picking. She was brought to this Home by the fieldworkers of Zindagi. Her own mother worked as a house-

* CWC is the sole authority to deal with matters concerning children in need of care and protection. A Committee has to be constituted for each district or group of districts, and consists of a chairperson and 4 other persons one of whom at least should be a woman.

The committee has the final authority to dispose of cases for the care, protection, treatment, development and rehabilitation of the children as well as to provide for their basic needs and human rights. A child rescued from hazardous occupation, brothel, abusive family or other such exploitative situation must be produced before the CWC who will conduct an inquiry to ensure optimum rehabilitation with minimal damage to the child. (source: <http://dpju.com>)

mother for sometime in the same Home but was transferred later due to some reason. Rehaan was sent to the formal school (class II) but she was brought back after a few months as she could not adjust there. Rehaan's step-father had murdered her brother and was in jail for sometime. She was not in touch with her mother for a month as her phone was switched off.

Pooja was probably from Bihar. She was rescued as a domestic labour from Noida by Sarathi (an NGO) and came through the CWC (Children's Welfare Committee). CWC tried to locate her house from the address she gave but could not find it as she only had a vague idea of where she came from.

These three children were not chosen in the strict sense of the term as one of them (Ruksaar) had huddled around Seema (house-manager) the first day we came to see the Home. That day, she brought to us, a sketch of herself as a doctor. She talked to us the second day too when we went to meet them and became our key informant which was crucial to us "to learn the ropes and gain acceptance by the group of informants". (Fine and Sandstrom 1988, p. 50.) It was due to her that we came in touch with Pooja. Rehaan met us the day we were learning about Zindagi from Meena. She asked us our names and later in the day when we were sitting in the courtyard, talking to Ruksaar, she came and joined us. We had not prepared any questions before going to the field and we did not carry any

camera or tape-recorder initially as we did not want to disturb their 'natural talk' though we do not deny that our presence would have set them thinking why we were there in the first place? We had explained the nature of our research to Meena and she permitted us to talk to children but we had some glitches gaining consent of children.

Gaining Consent

We were not total strangers in the setting as the nature of the Home was such that volunteers came to work, talk and spend time with the children regularly. We went and spoke to the children, told them that we were from the Department of Education. We did not seek their consent to be a part of our study straight away because, as a part of our strategy we wanted initially, to sense and analyse the children's culture through their talk. The first day we sat in the courtyard of the Home talking to Ruksaar, she said, "*Yahan sab log kaam se aaate hain. Humse milne koi nahin aata.*" (Everyone comes here for some work. They don't come to meet us.) We then, thought that we would wait for sometime and gain their trust before seeking consent for recording their voices or doing any activity specific to the research.

We could do so in our fifth meeting with them (on 3rd April, 2010) when we asked them if they knew who we were and why were we there. "*Humein maalum hai. humse milne aaye ho.*" (We know, you have come to meet

us.), said Rehaan. We then, told them that we were there to understand how they lived together in the Home. Even before gaining consent we were engaged in dialogue with children where we were actively listening to them and asking questions wherever we found an opportunity in an ongoing interaction. It was when the children were free from their classes that we sat with them, played with them and talked to them in the courtyard area and the area where they practiced dance for their function to be held on 17th April, 2010.

Engaging in Dialogue with Children

While it was normal for us investigators to come with certain values and cultural baggage to the field it was very imperative to realise that we did not impose these values on the investigation as it may be a cultural invasion for them (Freire 1997). Therefore, we planned to blend into the setting and allowed children to take any direction they chose and responded to opportunity for questioning in an ongoing interaction. Though this required more time and frequency of meetings with the participants, it yielded data in a natural setting. (Taylor and Bogdan 1984) We realised this in the third meeting when we planned to show the picture of 'modes of transportation' which they had done in EVS class. This picture had a cart puller, motor cycle, car and aeroplane. We thought we would show this to

the three participants and see how they interpret it now that we show it to them (our assumption being that that they would see the social class differences). But we did not do so as bringing in of material, though they were familiar with it would lead children to think such an exercise as a lesson to be learnt and they would tend to answer in a way that they think we would like to hear.

Instead, we went upstairs, to a room where Ruksaar and Rehaan were dancing with a group of girls. We sat down to see them dance. Ruksaar felt shy and sat down while the rest of the group danced on another dance number. One of us (researchers) got up and sat next to Ruksaar appreciating her dance and started talking to her about Lily (the elder girl who was teaching them all to dance). Meanwhile, the other (researcher) proposed Pooja to play game of pebbles with us. We made teams of two and while playing we came to know Ruksaar had fasted on Navratri with Pooja in order to regain her friendship. Here is how the conversation took place:

Researcher: *Tum raat ko dost ke saath sotey hoge?* (Do you sleep with your friend at night?)

Ruksaar: *Pehle Pooja mere saath soti thi. Ab Soni ke saath soti hai.* (earlier Pooja slept with me. Now she sleeps with Soni.)

Pooja: *Nahin to. Pehle soti thi. Ab to akele soti hun.* (No. I used to do so earlier. Now I sleep alone.)

(Later when we were going down

for lunch Ruksaar waited for Pooja to come along)

In another instance while we were sitting in the courtyard discussing when to come next? Ruksaar said we should come on Tuesday and Monday was a PTM day. Then we asked her,

Researcher: *PTM mein kya hota hai?* (What happens in the PTM?)

Ruksaar: *Mummy Papa ko bulaate hain.* (They call our parents.)

Researcher: *Kya baat karte hain?* (What do they talk?)

Ruksaar: *Nahin maalum. Bacchon ko ander nahin aane detey.* (I don't know. They don't let us in.)

Researcher: *Kya tumhari mummy kabhi batati hai PTM mein kya hota hai?* (Does your mother ever tell you what happens in PTM?)

Ruksaar (tight faced): *PTM mein mummy nahin aati. Ek baar aayee thi to maine Marriam ki shikayat lagayee thi. Mummy ne kuch nahin kiya to maine bhi batana chod diya.* (Mother doesn't come to PTM. She came once and I complained about Marriam. She did not do anything about it so I stopped telling her anything.)

Though we were careful to ask questions in a perspective display sequence (Rapley 2007) we recognised these three children had a desire to be validated by us so it was easy to establish close friendship with them on their terms. We also realised that they had a fair degree of authority in this friendship as they decided how close we could get to them. They sometimes talked to each

other in a code language in front of us and guarded their private worlds from us. Goody is one researcher who recognises that such difficulties inherent in communicating adequately with children have kept researchers from examining the world of the child from the vantage point of the child for many years (Goody cited in Tammivaara and Enright 1986) and this seems to be a tough challenge.

We faced another challenge when, after having observed the group over time, when we had discerned their interaction patterns (details given in the next section 'Exploring the Agency in Children's Voice) and the terms they used we tried to codify it and record their responses. We had codified the image keeping in mind, that,

- it represented a situation familiar to them so they recognise the situation and
- it was simple (neither explicit nor enigmatic) and offered various decoding possibilities. (Freire 2005).

We asked the children (Ruksaar, Rehaan and Pooja) to respond to the picture while we recorded their responses. They agreed and we took out the drawing and the tape recorder. All was well until Ruksaar refused to get her voice recorded. Instead, she asked Lily (an elder girl who taught them dance) to sing into it. They just walked off with the tape recorder saying they would not let us



Fig. 2

record their voices. The tape recorder was like an invasion into her private world which she rejected outright so, we left the task unfinished and planned another activity for another day.

It was from the field notes of our conversations with children and their drawings that we analysed the implicit themes about their own lives which are explicated below.

Exploring Agency in Children's Voice

The standpoint of exploring 'agency' in children's voices was related to our concerns with children as active constructors of their social worlds. Having an agency, children acted and reflected, negotiated with others and made sense of themselves and those around them. Agency therefore, meant free will and authority but not

complete autonomy as free will is exercised within social structures. (Appiah, 2005) James, Prout (1997) and Jenks (1982) identified "two ways in which children and agency are brought together. First, there is the notion of the 'tribal child' whereby the children are active and formative within their own social world of the peer group. Second, the notion of social structural or 'minority group child' denotes that children's behaviour and ways of thinking needs to be located within the broader social structure. Children's action here is constrained by virtue of a marginal social grouping." (James, Jenks and Prout cited in Wyness, 2000, p.88)

The first approach was relativist as it argued for children as active subjects of social structures rather than passive and in need of socialisation. The second approach was structural as it saw childhood as politically strategised as gender, race, caste etc. This approach argued for a structural overhaul of society, culture and politics for complete social recognition of the child.

From among the above two approaches, we were looking at agency in children's voice from the first approach. We were looking at children as agentive and formative within their own social world of peer group. Here, agentive meant how children constructed, checked, understood and transformed their lines of action in response to the actions of others. This was also one

reason why we focused on children's Home for locating children voice as here, children were a segregated social grouping and more accessible to us as researchers and second, children had more scope to mix with children of their own age group. This enabled us to observe a whole range of strategies (negotiating, sharing, manipulating) which they employed to give meaning to their social world. While observing, we also questioned them on their role in shaping their own decisions and relationships with others as their reflective responses were the key to explore their agency. From our observations (for nine days, spread over a period of one month) our engagement with children and through their drawings we elicited certain themes; the context of these themes were drawn from the vocabulary that children used. These themes are analysed below.

Analysis of Themes

Theme 1: Belongingness

I: *Yahan tumhari friend kaun hai? (Who is your friend here?)*

Ruksaar: *friend thi. Ab meri friend kisi aur ki friend ban gayee hai.* (She was my friend. Now she has made friends with someone else.)

Ruksaar liked Pooja. She tried to gain her friendship back by keeping Navratri fasts with her. They both went to the temple together. They both used to sleep together before Pooja decided to sleep alone.

When she could, Ruksaar tried to call her within the group. Once when we went downstairs for lunch, Ruksaar waited for Pooja. They bonded with each other and even shared a code language to guard their boundaries with us. Pooja too reciprocated belongingness with Ruksaar as when Ruksaar was angry and rude to her she squeezed Shobha's hand indicating her not to intervene. They both liked each other but Pooja's fear of taking responsibility for herself prevented her to form close relationships with



Fig. 3: Photo courtesy: Ruksaar



Fig. 4: Photo courtesy: Rehaan

others as she said, “*Mujhe apne aap se dar kyun lagta hai?*” (Why am I scared of myself?)

Later, one day when we asked them to draw ‘*Meri dost*’ (My friend) for us, Rehaan drew the photo of her friend who stayed in the Home and was elder to her. Ruksaar refused to draw a friend. We did not force her to draw. In a while she came and drew our photo. Later when we went downstairs she told us she did not like Pooja. We said we thought Pooja liked her and asked her if Pooja had some problems adjusting in the Home. At this she softened and said Pooja felt guilty of something she had done before and was scared of herself which was why she could not make friends.

Theme 2: Fear of being exploited

Rehaan and Ruksaar expressed their fear of exploitation due to their vulnerability when they said,

Rehaan: (to Sonica, health worker) *Tumhara mobile tod dena chahiye. Jab dekho batein karti rehti ho. Humare saath batein karne ka time nahin hai.* (I would rather break your mobile. You talk so much. You have no time left to talk to us.)

Ruksaar: *Yahan sab log kaam se aatey hain. Humse milne koi nahin aata.* (Everyone comes here for their own work. No one comes to meet us.)

Theme 3: Fear of being alone

They also express fear of being alone in a crowd.

Researcher: *Kabhi ghar jaati ho?* (Do you go home?)

Ruksaar: *Shuru shuru mein jab yahan aayee thi to mainne bhagne ki koshish ki thi. Phir mummy aayee thi. Meena didi ne bulaya tha. Ab to chuttiyon mein ghar jaati hun. Shuru mein itni ladkiyon ko dekh kar ghabra gayee thi.* (When I joined here initially, I tried to run away. Then mummy came. She was called by Meena didi. Now I go home during vacations. I got scared amidst so many girls.)

They also show they have to lose authority when staying together.

Ruksaar: *Ghar mein meri bahut zidd chalti hai. Yahan ko chup rehna padta hai.* (My obduracy is tolerated at home. here, I have to remain quiet.)

Yet they are assertive and show authority for their belongings.

Child: *Tuney jo dupatta pehna hai wo mummy maang rahi hai.* (Mummy is asking for the scarf you are wearing.)

Rehaan: *Kyon dun? Wo mera hai.* (Why should I? It belongs to me.)

They also realise that though they have to negotiate with so many children and adults, though they lose their authority in a group as compared to their houses, they are empowered as they endure hardships and education helps them do so.

Ruksaar: *Mera bhai kehta hai ki tu anaath hai. Mujhe hansa aati hai. Main padhungi. Bas school mein ek baar naam likha jaaye.* (My brother says I am an orphan. I feel like laughing. I will study. I wish I get enrolled in school.)

Conclusion

An analysis of the themes revealed that children's actions were intentional and reflexive. Even though they chose to stay in a children's home to study, they expressed a longing for their family ties showing how agency was constrained within structural limitations. Their agency was revealed in their constant engagements, reflections, manipulation and in guarding themselves in their social spaces. It was their culturally different contexts that made them reveal a part of their self as such was the skill of survival they possessed (Aptekar 1994). It also revealed that the choice of methodology was crucial

to elicit dialogue with children in different contexts as children are not a universal category. Contextualised as they are, researching with children required a conscious choice of taking the role of a complete observer and an observer as participant in order to understand the intricacies of their voice. As we heard these voices in the 'free spaces' (playing area, lunch hour, dancing hall), what remains to be seen is whether and to what extent do they have an agency and voice in the bridge course and formal schooling (which are structured spaces) as these children expressed faith in education for empowering themselves.

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