Situation of the dissertation

The aim of this PhD research project was to explore the challenges that (1) young people in street situations, (2) their families, and (3) street educators encounter when searching for a life away from the streets. Starting with a literature review on interventions that exist for children and adolescents in street situations throughout the world, the following study focused upon the situation in Bolivia. About 10,000 Bolivian children and young people appropriate the streets as their home. Despite the increasing national and international attention since the 90s, research has shown that 97% to 99% of Bolivian children and adolescents in street situations leave intervention programmes prematurely. These figures reveal the complexity of leaving street life. Through participatory action research with the aforementioned actors, we have attempted to provide more knowledge to organizations to improve their programs for young people in street situations. In the study with mothers we have found that young people perceive the streets to be a solution to their problems at home, where young people and their parents continue to negotiate their relationship, even if the child lives in the street. By demonstrating that the relationships between children and parents are dynamic relational processes and not static, we hope to motivate street educators to be more open to engage with relatives. Families are still left out, despite their desire to be part of interventions. Furthermore, reflecting on the experience of an unsuccessful participatory action research with young people, we have argued that the young people do not necessarily perceive their presence in the streets as unjust. The (structural) violence experienced in the streets is considered to be all the more unjust. This doctoral research calls for an understanding of the benefits cities and the streets can bring to children’s and young people’s development and well-being. But without addressing the underlying structural issues that perpetuate the violence on the streets of Bolivia, cities will continue to be unsafe and young people will continue to struggle in the streets. We therefore want to invite researchers, practitioners and policy makers not to consider the street and the family as sources of problems, but to acknowledge them and integrate them into intervention programmes, as sources of possible opportunities for children and young people in street situations.

Curriculum Vitae

Isabel Berckmans (*1985, Edegem) obtained the degree of Licentiate in Psychology at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) in 2009. Since October 2010, she has been working as a doctoral candidate with the research group Interpersonal, Discursive and Narrative Studies at the department of Clinical and Lifespan Psychology (Faculty of Psychology & Educational Sciences, VUB). Her research project is a joint PhD between the VUB and the Universidad Católica Boliviana San Pablo in La Paz (Bolivia). Isabel is also affiliated with the Centre for Children in Vulnerable Situations, which is a research centre based on the cooperation between the VUB, Ghent University and Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. Under the guidance of Prof. Dr. Gerrit Loots and Prof. Dr. Erick Roth she studied the intervention programmes for children and adolescents in street situation in Bolivia. She stayed in La Paz and El Alto (Bolivia) for a total duration of thirteen months to realise her fieldwork.

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