English children's respectful reflections of the rights and lives of their Kenyan peers: A grounded theory study.

Abstract

In 2002 a UK Government initiative enabled the fostering of links between UK school children and school children in Low and Middle Income Countries (LMIC) through the shared *Just Like You* project about health and rights. This manuscript reports English children's perspectives on the lives of their peers in Mbita Kenya, whose school link began in 2007. Data were gathered and analysed in 2014 via six focus groups with 132 children. The result was a constructed grounded theory of *respectful reflection* that represents a basic social process. Respectful reflection comprises three categories; *being similar, living differently* and *finding the strengths*.

Keywords: United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, children's reflection, grounded theory, school linking, Millennium Development Goals, Sustainable Development Goals.

Introduction

In 1997 the UK Government published the policy document; *Eliminating World Poverty: A Challenge for the 21st Century (UK Government, 1997)*. This White Paper set the scene for the British Government's commitment to sustainable development of the planet, with the elimination of world poverty as its most important challenge. A further White Paper, *Making Globalisation Work for the World's Poor(UK Government, 2000)*, followed in 2000 and articulated the Government's main aim of attaining the International Development Targets. These targets became universally known as the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs)(United Nations, 2015). Both White Papers stressed the importance of increasing public awareness of international development and global inter-dependence, with a subsequent strategy paper stating that every child would receive development education (Short, 1999). It was thought that including a global citizenship dimension in education would give children the opportunity to appreciate similarities between peoples everywhere. Additionally, understanding the global context would help children develop skills to combat prejudice and discrimination. Recognising that regional action plans would be needed to achieve the development education vision, the Department for International Development (DfID) called for expressions of interest from groups interested in development education. The *Enabling Effective Support (EES)* for a global dimension in the school curriculum initiative was born. Members of two organisations, One World Network North East and development Direct wrote the EES action plan for the North East of England. In 2002 staff from development Direct received funding from the EES initiative to introduce the *Just Like You* project to primary, middle and high schools in Northumberland, England.

Background Literature

Just Like You Project

Using Child to Child's (Child to child, 2016) vision of children as active participants in society and agents of change, *Just Like You* (JLY) is a health and rights project comprising six steps, with an

additional school linking component. Schools in North East England were linked with schools in The Gambia, Tanzania, Kenya and Peru. In Step 1, children are introduced to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Save the Children, 2015). Described as the most rapidly and widely ratified international human rights Treaty in history, the UNCRC changed the way children were viewed and treated, from passive recipients of care and charity to human beings with a distinct set of rights. First adopted by the United Nations in 1989, it has been ratified by all of the World's countries, except the USA and Somalia. Ratification legally binds Governments to incorporate the 54 Articles of the UNCRC into policy. A United Nations appointed Committee monitors how well countries are implementing the Articles of the UNCRC at five yearly intervals.

One novel introduction of the UNCRC is through the 'magic tin of rights' game, where an icon represents an Article and the children guess which one it is. For example, a toy microphone represents Article 12 – the right to an opinion. In step 2 of JLY, children are asked to consider a health topic, such as 'accidents.' In step 3 they find out more about their health topic through practical research and in dialogue with their local community. Step 4 centres around communicating and negotiating with each other to share results and form an action plan. Step 5 sees the children implementing their action plan and Step 6 is the final stage where the children evaluate the project and share their results with the local community and their linked school.

School linking

By 2005 when EES funding for development Direct finished, the *Just Like You* project had been introduced to 42 schools in the North East of England. Data obtained from 24 schools illustrated that the project had involved 5865 children (4-18 years inclusive) and 331 teachers. Additionally 90 peer educators (students in their final year at High School) had developed health promotion material featuring HIV and AIDs prevention with peers in their linked school in The Gambia. Furthermore, development Direct had facilitated 13 North- South reciprocal visit grants awarded by the British Council (British Council, 2015). These grants supported teachers, who were a part of the link, to visit

their partnered schools in the global South and plan joint activities for their pupils. An evaluation in 2008 revealed that of the 60 schools links facilitated by development Direct, 20 were sustained with schools in The Gambia, Tanzania and Kenya. By 2014, at the time of this study, 15 of the original 20 schools still had links. Ponteland County Middle School, Northumberland was one of these schools, who linked with Wanga School, Mbita Kenya in 2007, which is the focus of the following research report.

Theoretical Framework

The following reported qualitative study was underpinned using a constructionist grounded theory methodology. Although social constructionists are noted for their refusal to favour particular philosophical foundations, constructionist research is heavily influenced by philosophical debate. Constructionist texts are peppered with citations from the works of Jacques Derrida, John Dewey, Judith Butler, George Herbert Mead, Karl Marx and many other philosophers (Weinberg, 2008). Constructionism and constructivism are very closely aligned. The former refers to the way we construct our world through social relationships and the latter is concerned with how the world is constructed in an individual's mind (Gergen, 2009). Kathy Charmaz was one of only a few students, collectively known as the "second generation grounded theorists" (Birks & Mills, 2015, p. 3), who were mentored by both Glaser and Strauss, the originators of grounded theory. Charmaz (2014) suggests it was their profound influence that led to her developing constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000).

Social constructionists acknowledge that they enter the field of inquiry with their own histories and theories, which require scrutiny during the research process. Charmaz (2008) suggests that, by being aware of their relativism, constructionist grounded theorists foster reflexivity in how they construct their research actions. Mills, et al.(2006) postulate that grounded theory follows a methodological spiral that began with Glaser and Strauss' original text and continues its evolution into constructivism, with Charmaz's work placing the researcher as author, reconstructing experience

and meaning from data. Charmaz's important contribution to the evolution of grounded theory methodology is the notion that rather than being a distant expert, which is how Glaser and Strauss initially positioned the researcher, they are instead implicit in the research process, co-constructing experience and meaning with research participants. The following study used the tenets of constructionist / constructivist grounded theory, with the first author co-constructing meaning with data provided by the children from Ponteland County Middle and High schools.

Aim of the study

The aim of the study was to investigate English children's perceptions of the health and rights status of their peers' who attend school in Mbita Kenya.

Population and sample size of the study

The study population was English children aged 11- 18 years attending two schools in Northumberland, Northern England. The majority of the children attended Ponteland County Middle School (PCMS). PCMS is co-educational and caters for approximately 600 children aged between 9 and 13 years, inclusive. It is situated in rural Northumberland, approximately 8 miles from the city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Children progress from PCMS next door to Ponteland High School at aged 13 years. PCMS was awarded the British Council's international school award in 2014 in recognition of work fostering global connections and citizenship.

The sample size comprised 121, 11 – 13 year olds attending PCMS and ten 17 – 18 year olds who attended Ponteland High School. The older children were invited to participate in the study as the first author wished to explore with older children her heightened theoretical sensitivity about respect that was articulated by the younger children towards their Kenyan peers.

Procedure for data collection

Data collection took place through five focus groups at Ponteland County Middle School (PCMS). Two focus groups were conducted at PCMS in May 2014, with a further three focus groups taking

place the following day. All of the children attending the five groups were aged 11 – 13 years. Two of the 12 year old children had visited Wanga school in 2013, when they were 11 years old. One month after the fifth focus group, a further focus group was conducted at Ponteland County High School with ten 17 – 18 year olds who had all visited Wanga school in 2013. Consistent with grounded theory methods, information from the younger children had increased (first author's) theoretical sensitivity to their concerns about gender disparity and how they identified strength and resilience in their Kenyan peers. {First author} wished to explore these concepts of gender disparity and resilience with older children, who may potentially provide more sophisticated explanations and reasoning due to their developmental age.

The study was granted ethical approval by the University of Auckland's Human Participants Ethics Committee, Ref: 9768. Parents consented to their child's participation and children signed an assent form to indicate that they understood the nature of the research and were willing participants in the focus groups.

Data collection and analysis

Key components of grounded theory methods include; concurrent data collection and analysis, coding and categorisation of data, written memos, theoretical sampling, acquisition of theoretical sensitivity and identification of a core category (Birks & Mills, 2015).

Five focus groups were conducted over a two day period with 121 children aged 11 – 13 years. Focus groups were facilitated by KH and one teacher who taught global issues in the school. The first author, (KH) compiled memos of themes that were identified in the first focus group to then explore further with subsequent groups. Memos are informal analytic notes that serve as an audit trail and evidence of a researcher's developing theoretical sensitivity (Charmaz, 2006; Hoare, Mills, and others, 2012a). Theoretical sensitivity is the ability to recognise in the data pertinent elements that resonate with the researcher's prior experiences and knowledge. The researcher then seeks more information to increase their sensitivity as the study progresses and further data collection episodes

are conducted (Hoare, Buetow, and others, 2012). During the focus groups, children were asked to watch a continuous PowerPoint presentation of photographs that had been taken by their teacher on a visit to Wanga school. In two of the focus groups, two children had visited Wanga school and so were able to make comments and answer questions about their Kenyan peers from first-hand experience. While the photographs were displayed, children were asked to think about the similarities and differences between their lives and their peers' lives in Wanga. Subsequently, they drew or wrote about these points. Group discussions were digitally recorded and transcribed by KH. Additionally, the children's work was collected and analysed.

Focus groups were digitally recorded and then transcribed. Initial codes identified from the transcripts and children's work were constructed by KH and further elevated into focused codes. These codes are concepts, the meaning of this being a descriptive or explanatory idea that is embedded in a word, symbol or label (Birks & Mills, 2015). Focused codes are groups of initial codes that portray the same meaning. The data were mainly coded using gerunds which are verbs used as nouns and are useful for the analyst because they highlight action and process(Hoare, Mills, and others, 2012b). Categories are focused codes that have been elevated through a process of abstraction. Following the first five focus groups, a number of key codes and categories were explored further with a final focus group of eleven 17 and 18 year olds who had all visited Wanga school in 2013 to enable abstraction of the data. Abstraction in grounded theory has been described as a means of logical inferencing that is reasonable and scientific and demonstrates profound insights, thus highlighting new knowledge (Reichertz, 2007).

Data quality

KH constructed the initial codes, with KW checking that the codes resonated once she read the transcripts from the focus groups. KH recorded memos and KW added notes to the transcripts at two different dates during 2015 and 2016. These memos and notes acted as an audit trail to illustrate KH and KW's constructions as they scrutinised the data (Birksand others, 2008).

Results

The authors are cognisant that the following constructions from the data represent perceptions from children based on pictures from a Power Point presentation. Some of the children had prior knowledge of the school link from their exposure to the link the previous year. Only two of the 11 – 13 year olds had visited Wanga school in 2013. However all of the 17 – 18 year olds had spent time at Wanga during 2013. Overall, the study resulted in construction of the theory of *respectful reflection,* which is presented using storyline. Storyline in grounded theory was first described by one of its originators, Anselm Strauss, who published with Juliet Corbin (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It was later developed by Birks et al. (Birksand others, 2009) and has been described as a 'strategy for facilitating integration, construction, formulation and presentation of research findings through the production of a coherent grounded theory' (Birks & Mills, 2015). The following paragraph is a synopsis of the theory and describes the three main categories of *being similar, living differently* and *finding the strengths.*

Storyline

Having thought and talked about *being similar* and the differences between their lives and their Kenyan peers, the children made lists and drew pictures that identified *living differently*. Once they had completed their task, a discussion ensued which revolved around the many similar items and experiences they all shared as children. Following that discussion, they started to highlight the difficulties of learning in a harsh environment without technology and gadgets. The issue of gender disparity was highlighted in every focus group, with boys in the focus groups often being more vocal about how much more work Kenyan girls did than the Ponteland girls. Finally, the children reflected on the demeanour and abilities of their Kenyan peers by *finding the strengths* in how the Mbita children lived.

The following account uses data segments and memos to support the three constructed categories:

The theory of respectful reflection

(First author's) Memo May 6th 2014

'Respect and human rights was clearly displayed in the children's classrooms. They were spectacular in the number of posters and pictures portraying information about children's rights and the Millenium Development Goals. These children were immersed in human rights information probably without knowing it.'

Category one - Being similar

While looking at the posters and photographs the children observed similarities between the Wanga school environment and their own. They noticed that the Wanga school had "prefect type people and monitors [and] a nursery, like our preschool." They identified that the Wanga children also had "buildings and shelter, desks, school uniform and teachers," that boys and girls learned together and that they all liked sports, "all together."

Category 2 - Living differently

Participants identified how they and their peers were *living differently*, comprised of focused codes, *being different, learning in difficult conditions*, and *noticing gender disparity*.

Being different

The children listed and talked about some of the differences between their environment and the children at Wanga school by stating:

> *[There are] no computers or smart boards, … no flushing toilets, … no buses. [There is] no clean water … It has to be cleaned with tablets [and it comes from]the lake.*

One student (11 – 13 year old group) made the comment that there were no mixed races in the children who attended the school in Kenya. A debate ensued following this comment that postulated there would not be people from other cultures at Wanga school because nobody would want to move to live there.

Learning in difficult conditions

The 11 – 13 year olds discussed the heat, suggesting that the warmth would make it a difficult learning environment. They highlight that there were no air conditioners in the classrooms and illustrated empathy by suggesting that it must be, “really hard to focus when you’re really hot.”

Other points that the 11-13 year olds highlighted about learning in difficult conditions were that the classrooms were small, that the students had to walk to school which would make them “tired” but also “fit.” Participants noted that some students walked as far as 8 miles to school. The topic of water featured in the discussions with one student suggesting that they “drink parasites” because the water came from lake Victoria.

Safety was highlighted by the student in one of the 11-13 year old focus groups who had visited Wanga who stated,

> *they've got very bad health and safety……. they had loads of like cactus, aloe vera plants everywhere, and loads of kids were chopping them using a machete.*

At this point their teacher who had visited Wanga school the previous year interjected with the following comment:

> *These girls in the kitchen [picture displayed on the slide show] who are preparing the lunch for the children who don't have any lunch at home, who don't have parents, they're just a bit older than you and they'll all be using machetes, um, a big pot of boiling water here, and that's the oil there, to get up to the heat, …….would I send you lot into a big room, and get oil up to boiling point, and leave you to cook the doughnut balls,* ***no way*** (emphasis).

This comment was interpreted by (first author) as inferring that children at Wanga school were more adept and responsible at using a dangerous object such as a machete and cooking with boiling liquids, than the children at PCMS.

Noticing gender disparity

In all of the focus groups with the 11-13 year olds, the children discussed the different roles of girls and boys. It was noted that only girls fetched water from the lake in buckets that they carried on their heads. When questioned by the researcher why this situation should be so the students responded with the following comments

> *because they're like better at carrying things on their heads*
>
> *cause like, the women do everything*
>
> *Is it just like the way they've always done it?.....tradition*

In a memo recorded following three focus groups on Day 1 [first author]noted that the children, particularly the boys, were very vocal about girls and boys not being treated equally. Gender disparity was highlighted in every focus group, evidenced by the following comments from the 11-13 year old focus groups.

> *Girls have the same opportunities as boys at Ponteland and at Wanga girls are used as slaves.*
>
> *It's a little bit sexist.*
>
> *I think they should both do an equal amount of the jobs, so like half the boys do water half the girls do water, and then the other half do the other jobs.*

It was [first author's] theoretical sensitivity to the 11 – 13 year olds noticing gender disparity that led her to theoretically sample the older group of children at Ponteland High School who had all visited Wanga school the previous year. Using the grounded theory tenet of theoretical sampling [first author] raised the issue of gender disparity with the 17 and 18 year olds. These young people also had many comments about gender disparity. See the following data segments:

> *They [women] weren't nearly as confident as the men were to engage in conversation, I'm assuming because socially they're- it's not really acceptable for them to do so, but at the time*

I didn't really think of it like that.

when they were at the bead work, they were there because they'd been widowed, and then they had no real place in like society, after they don't have a husband, which I don't think is a very good way to run like- I don't know, with [English] society it doesn't matter as much any more whether you've got a husband or whether you don't and you can just get on with it you've got the same opportunities, but then there it just kinda seemed like... Not cast aside, but it's not, it's very different.

Some people actually offered to buy us, the girls, when we were at the market, a man came up to J [trip organiser] and offered him some money for the girls

Obviously we're so used to in this world, in England, being equal [female student]

Yeah, and I would never imagine that I wouldn't get an opportunity or I wouldn't be listened to because I was a woman.

Category 3 – Finding the strengths

The final category was constructed from data that was usually imparted towards the end of the focus groups with the 11 – 13 year olds, when the children were asked to think about how happy or sad the children in Wanga seemed with their lives. Additionally they were questioned about what children in England could learn from them or help them with.

they could help us, and we could help them. They might have discovered things that we haven't already discovered.

they could show us how to survive in the desert.

they can show us how different life can be in different parts of the world, so you know like how the world works better

[They could] *educate us with their education basically, so we can find out, we can find out what lessons are like from their perspective*

they can show us how they live without all the gadgets and stuff and what they do

we have bad health because we are able to sit in front of a TV screen all day and they have to go out and work

We know what the necessities are for life, and we understand how lucky we are ……..And instead of being all selfish and buying lots of things since we understand [how children in Wanga live] *we will be more responsible with money and will not ask our parent for loads of things.*

The final category of *finding the strengths* led to [first author] analysing how the process of discussing the lives of Kenyan children at Wanga school had caused her to abstract the concept of *respectful reflection.*

Respectful reflection

Reflecting on the value of school linking with other countries, the following comment was made by an 11 – 13 year old:

well you can't just stay in one culture cos if you move to another country you won't know what they do and how they live their life and you will get a shock.

The following comments were made by two 11-13 year olds about not wasting money and water after talking about the value of these things to children in Wanga:

keeping some of our money, so we are not like wasting it all

say when we, say when you just get a drink of water and you have one sip and then you throw it out, and someone says to you ……. waste not want not.

First author thought the best way to test the concept of respectful reflection was to theoretically sample the older children and young people (17 – 18 year olds) whose thought processes would be more sophisticated, due to their developmental stage. She asked them their thoughts on their experiences of Wanga school and the children and young people who attended there.

The 17 - 18 year olds reflected on a number of issues and how their perspective on life had changed since visiting Kenya. The following comment was made when asked if they'd missed having mobile phones, laptops, television and other gadgets that needed electricity:

It was really quite nice getting away from it all.

A number of the students had visited a medical facility in Mbita following one of them having an accident. The students commented on the poorly equipped facility and the board in the waiting room stating how much things cost. He made the following comment:

We get so well looked after with our medical care in this country, and obviously we don't have to pay for it on the NHS, we really should kinda, look after ourselves a lot more.

They talked about the impact of the Kenyan experience when they returned to England

'cause now I like realise that it's so important to not complain about [laughs] not complain about things. It just, it seems a bit menial like a lot of the things like day to day lives that we complain about, and where we wanna be in our lives and stuff, but it tends to be you know straight forward for us but it's not for them.

when we came back we talked about it [with our families] all the time. Constantly. They got sick of us.

So obviously we were sharing our experiences with them [families], and even though they haven't gone over there, we've told them all the different things that went on and what we saw and how we felt about it, so they've kind of shared part of the experience that we had.

Reflecting on the lives of their peers in Wanga, they made the following comments about feeling guilty and sad:

I feel a bit sad about it because with a lot of things there I kind of realise how much I take for granted when I'm here, and just because somebody's born there their life's going to be so different, but it shouldn't be that way across the world.

And you know when you go to a restaurant and get lots of nice food and pay lots of money for it, and like every morning have Actimel for breakfast to get good bacteria, I just feel bad like how we're getting a better opportunity than they are in life.

There was uh, there was this dude…….. we were collecting all the litter up from all the rubbish when we were at the Masai camp, and what happened was er, he's actually at like a

school or something like that, he studies for sciences and stuff, and at the time I wanted to become a dentist, so it was you know, we had like similar ambitions, but he said he couldn't go and do the things he wanted to, because he doesn't have enough money, and he was, like more intelligent than me clearly, like he knew loads more things, and I just thought like I'll probably end up getting to a stage where I can actually do a decent job and you know get a degree and he might not ever do that. And I was a bit, a bit sad.

The young people recognised the resilience, motivation and demeanour of their Kenyan peers by making the following comments:

we're so materialistic in everything we do, and they don't seem to be bothered at everything we've got, there was no like envy.

all the things that we have, us being brought up like that, but you'd never miss it if you'd never had it before, and you can be just as happy without it.

I think in the West it's easy to just exist and not really do anything like ever, and go from day to day not really achieving anything, but they kind of have to push themselves to survive and kind of better themselves for that, whereas we don't really have to push ourselves at all unless we are motivated to, whereas they don't really have the option.

There was one evening we played a football match, it was all of us against all the Kenyans, ……Like, on that morning, we were all quite, we were all in a bad mood, and they said oh we're gonna have a football match, and by the end of the day everyone was so happy, just after this one football match.

Discussion

This study is the first to report school linking from the child or young person's perspective. School linking has been described as a controversial issue by some authors' (Martin, 2007). They suggest that linking with a school in the global South may produce committed citizens who actively fund-raise for their linked school but who may not be encouraged to be critically reflective. Our research refutes this view and supports the work of Bourn (Bourn, 2014) who points out that although colonial and charitable influences are still strong in a number of English schools with links to schools in the global South, teachers have been conscious of these influences. Many teachers have addressed these influences through activities and curriculum initiatives that challenge stereotypes and promote similarities as well as differences (Bourn, 2014). Indeed, the children in this study were thoughtful and respectful throughout the focus groups. Their comments were reflective and pragmatic and lacked any negative judgement of their peers in Kenya. One important factor was that the pictures, posters and displays in the classroom environment during the focus groups with the 11-13 year olds, reflected social justice and the importance of children's rights.

Piaget and Inhelder (1969) in their seminal work suggest that children at aged 11 – 13 years, are in their preadolescent period of psychological development, described as a specific period of intellectual growth that marks the end of childhood. This period, they state, is characterised by a greater awareness of others' perspectives and an increased focus on the capacity for empathy, social conscience and reciprocal social relationships.

The theory of respectful reflection is supported by Eisenberg's theory of the development of prosocial and altruistic behaviour (Eisenbergand others, 2006). Prosocial behaviour encompasses sharing, cooperating with and helping others. Environmental factors affect children's willingness to behave prosocially and the environment of PCMS reflected that of a school with a strong commitment to teaching children about global issues and human rights. Research involving real life situations where children have witnessed role-modelled prosocial behaviours demonstrated that

children acquired these behaviours through social learning (Eisenbergand others, 2006). School linking is a medium to foster co-operation across the globe and for children to witness prosocial behaviours role modelled by their teachers and peers. Linking children via schools across the world may be a way to promote children respectfully reflecting and helping each other.

Conclusion

The Sustainable Development Goals have superseded the Millenium Development Goals. UNICEF has suggested that sustainable development starts with safe, healthy well-educated children, that safe and sustainable societies are essential for children and children's voices, and that choices and participation are critical for a sustainable future (UNICEF, 2013). Linking children via schools across the world may be a way to promote children respectfully reflecting and helping each other.

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