

## **Disabling streets or disabling education? Challenging a deficit model of street-connectedness**

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Current interventions aiming to assist street-connected children in making the transition from the street, prioritise a return to mainstream primary education. In so doing, implementing organisations equate their ideas of a normative childhood with school attendance. This article challenges the appropriateness of such priorities by exploring the experiences of teachers in four Central Kenya primary schools and examining Kenyan education policy related to street-connected children. The paper argues that teachers' belief in their inability to support the learning of street-connected children alongside the linguistic loopholes within the wording of educational policy to allow for alternative education systems, formal education can further compound processes of marginalisation. Findings further indicate that current education policy and practice can fail to effectively incorporate street-connected children and to some extent be described as disabling.

**Keywords:** Street-Connected Children; Kenya; Inclusive Education; Policy; Teacher Education

### **Disabling streets or disabling education: Challenging a deficit model of street-connectedness**

*A question of access*

*I hid among a group of retreating kids and slipped away. I ran through traffic, scaled the road divider, and disappeared...My last memory of my family was of the twins burping and giggling (Akpan, 2010:36)*

The short story *An Ex-mas Feast* (Akpan, 2010) introduces us to three siblings who engage with life on the street in Nairobi in different ways and places education at the centre of a struggle that exists for two of these children. A lack of access for one leads her to prostitution in order to ensure that her parents can pay for her brother to attend school. Her brother, however, leaves home for the street as he does not want his sister to earn money in this way for him. Although a work of fiction, *An Ex-mas Feast* reflects discourses regarding street-connected children and education that privilege access. In essence, global agendas promoting children's rights, champion education and the promotion of universal access as a means of

eliminating poverty and enabling social justice (Terzi, 2010).

Consequently, programmes working to help street-connected children place a return to school, or starting school for the first time, as a key factor in ensuring that these children become *children*. It is implied that a street-connected childhood is inherently disabling and that providing access to school enables justice to be achieved. However, Akpan's story-line in *An Ex-mas Feast*, positions the three children as care-takers responsible for earning to ensure that their parents and younger siblings are fed. It questions normative ideas of childhood by placing a 12 year-old girl in the role of bread winner, decision maker, and in one instance, as the most sensible 'head' of the family. The characters in *An Ex-mas Feast* share a number of similarities with the street-connected children and their families that I have met through my work in Kenya, many of whom show resourcefulness and resilience, which problematises the deficit model of street-connectedness.

The term *street-connected* has been used to describe children and youth who live and/or work on the street (Thomas de Benitez, 2011). The label *street children* defines them by the situation in which they find themselves and conveys a narrow definition of what it means to be on the street (Ennew and Swart-Kruger, 2003). I choose to use the phrase *street-connected*, as it describes the situation rather than the child and attempts to better represent a continuum of possible realities. For example, there are children who spend day and night on the streets and have no contact with their families, others who regularly visit home, some who only work on the street in the day-time and sleep in cheap rental accommodation with other children, and also those who visit the street from home to make money daily, in the evenings, after school and during the weekends.

Before starting my doctoral research, I was sponsorship coordinator and later facilitator of a holiday tuition scheme at a community-based organisation in Central Kenya. My role involved regular sessions with children and youth who had been street-connected, to talk through their progress at school and establish any problems, both academically and socially. I am therefore familiar with a number of the challenges they faced when returning to education (see also Corcoran 2014a, 2014b). Also, while engaged with the opportunities available to them in street situations and the associated challenges (Heinonen, 2011; Davies, 2008), children and youth are able to develop skills that are not necessarily expected within a traditional classroom. Therefore, I question current one-size-fit-all interventions that emphasise the disabling aspects of street-connectedness and prioritise the return of children to mainstream classrooms, without critically examining the appropriateness of the move or the level of support given by the school to the child making the transition. If childhood requires education, then it follows that such education should be inclusive and of a high enough quality to ensure that all children develop the capabilities to survive as an adult in society.

This paper makes conceptual and empirical contributions to the field. Through an analysis of three key policy documents pertaining to education, and fieldwork exploring the practice of teachers in four schools in Central Kenya, I highlight the predominance of a deficit model of

street-connectedness. This deficit model produces a lack of confidence in how teachers perceive their ability to develop the learning of street-connected children. The interpretation of street-connectedness as a special educational need (SEN) within policy, compounds the effects of the deficit model and influences the emergence of an alternative system of education for street-connected children and youth. As a result, I suggest that while being street-connected can lead to a disabling childhood, the education system heralded as a solution, can be just as disabling: a lack of adequate teacher education, social policy and collaboration between stakeholders can further marginalise street-connected children and youth, limiting academic performance and the development of their capabilities.

### **Street-connectedness as disabling**

There are many varied and contested definitions of disability. The social model describes disability as a social construction or stigma resulting from barriers imposed by society as a reaction to that person's particular set of characteristics. These characteristics are constructed in such a way that they are *identity-forming*, especially for the observer. These identities are seen as deficient owing to characteristics conceptualised as barriers to leading a 'normal' life. Such barriers further reinforce inequalities and exacerbate the levels of poverty experienced by those constructed as disabled (Albert, 2004).

There is a proliferation of literature on street-connected children that highlights their marginalisation and exposure to abuse by the public and also by authorities such as the police (e.g. Walakira et al. 2014; Whitman and Nowrojee, 1997). Words used to label street-connected children such as the Kiswahili term *chokora* used in Kenya, which means 'a person dirty in both body and spirit' (Ngugi, 1998), affect the ways in which members of the public perceive and interact with such children. Being street-connected is not synonymous with disability, but there are intersections of experience, in terms of social difference, stigma, deviance and the 'othering' of identity. Similar to Sherry's comparison of disability studies and queer theory, both disability studies and research into street-connectedness 'engage with the lives of people who can experience high levels of discrimination violence and intolerance' (2004:770).

There is an obvious overlap between disability and street-connectedness with regards to the number of street-connected children and youth who have disabilities or have disabled siblings and/or parents for whom they are responsible. But being street-connected also intersects with a socially constructed definition of disability. The prejudice that is levelled towards those that are disabled and those who are street-children, can be constructed in similar ways through stereotyping, and in the worst case scenarios lead to abuse or social interactions that cause emotional trauma. Sherry (2004:772) also attributes 'familial isolation' to disabled individuals, where they are often the only person in family with a disability. A street-connected child can also be the only member of the family who engages with the street,

particularly if they are the oldest child and perceived to be (either by themselves or their family) responsible for helping the family in a similar way to the daughter in Akpan's (2010) *An Ex-mas Feast*. But for street-connected children, this isolation can go further if they live on the streets full-time and have limited contact with their families. Returning home does not necessarily end this isolation, particularly considering possible negative aspects of living on the street (Mathur et al. 2009; Kilbride et al. 2000; Senenayake et al. 1998).

It can be argued that one of the main areas of difference between children with disabilities and those that are street-connected is the ability to remove themselves from the categorisation that is discriminated against. It is very difficult to remove impairments such as severe cerebral palsy, but it is possible to remove a child or youth from the street. However, the child may still need time to come to terms with the stigma and marginalisation they experienced as a result of being street-connected. Karabanow (2008) describes 'identities of exclusion' that develop as a result of the stigmatisation that these children face as a product of living on the street, and identifies five steps, or layers of change, that a child must undertake before they can disengage with the street and exit effectively. Other authors emphasise challenges such as substance addiction and leaving the community or familial relationships they share with peers on the street, not to mention the survival tactics, both positive and negative, that they develop there (e.g. Ali et al. 2004; McAlpine et al. 2010).

Disability theory discusses the ways in which a disabled person interacts with the environment or context within which they find themselves, implying that their marginalisation depends on how they experience their own disability (e.g. Lang, 2007, Shakespeare, 2009). In this instance, a street-connected individual's experience intersects with being disabled when applying the capability framework developed by Sen (1999). An individual's functioning capability in society depends on his/her substantive freedoms and access to resources; the disability therefore results from social injustice where an individual is unable to enjoy the same freedoms of choice, or capabilities as others in society (Nussbaum, 2000). According to Terzi (2005), the use of the capability framework highlights the idea that education is of instrumental value in terms of employment opportunities, the ability to increase levels of human capital, and the rates of return from education. Schimmel (2006) uses the capability framework to emphasise how street-connected children who have limited or no access to school consequently have minimal choices as a result of being cognitively and socially underdeveloped. However, what happens to the children who transition from the street into the classroom?

The organisation Retrak is utilising measurements of well-being to monitor children's transition from the streets (Corcoran and Wakia, 2013). Analysis of the data shows that well-being scores related to education do not improve as quickly as other indicators measured in the year after children make the transition from the street, and there could be a number of reasons why this lower rate of improvement is observed. There is limited research on transitions between schools from southern contexts, but studies in the UK reveal that an

individual's ability to adjust to a new school depends on many factors (West et al. 2010) and bad transitions affect levels of wellbeing and depression later on. Coffey (2013) highlights the importance of relationships between all stakeholders - e.g. parents, teachers, students - to the transition process, and Brewin and Statham (2011) address the need for an holistic, adaptable approach in their research with looked-after children moving to a new school. For street-connected children the transition into the classroom can be all the more problematic as they have had time away from formal education, or may not have started school at all.

The difficulties faced by children starting or returning to school are all specific to the individual, and affect the ability to settle back into the classroom in different ways. Some of the reasons given by children interviewed in Kenya include being in a room with children who are much younger than they are, trying to maintain concentration, and being given little support from teachers (Corcoran, 2014a). Bad school experiences were also cited by a minority of young men as reasons for migrating to the street in the first place (Corcoran, 2013). Yet, street-connected children and youth are often only thought of as marginalised from education in terms of access and, when their journey to the classroom from the street is facilitated, the organisation assisting this move may relinquish responsibility at the school gate.

### **Inclusive Education**

In 1994, in Salamanca, Spain, 92 governments, including that of Kenya, agreed a statement on the education of disabled children. The resulting framework for action enabled the funding of pilot projects and influenced education policies to incorporate the inclusion of disabled children within the schools 'that would be attended if the child did not have a disability' (UNESCO, 1994). In the twenty years since Salamanca, the definitions of both disability and inclusive education (IE) have become varied and contested.

IE is increasingly seen internationally as a reform that welcomes diversity, and the development of values and beliefs that provides educational opportunities for all learners (Miles and Singal, 2010; UNESCO, 2001). In advocating for, and developing inclusion, there is a 'conscious effort to identify exclusionary forces in schools and in society and to devise strategies to combat these forces' (Miles, 2000). Consequently, there are three main principles to IE: social justice, educational equity and school responsiveness (Dyson, 2001). Ainscow et al. (2006) identify a typology of five perspectives of IE, one of which is providing education for all. For education systems in the global South this translates to ensuring classroom places for the '57 million' (UNESCO, 2014) children and young people who are still out-of-school. Street-connected children are included in this number, yet policy often fails to get them into education (CWS and UNESCO, 2005).

Understandings of IE, and education for all, and subsequent policy responses not only depend on the agreed definitions of the policy makers, but also particular economic, geographical,

and political contexts. Even though international agendas promoting campaigns such as IE can become exports from the Global North that attempt to transplant *northern thinking* and ‘reinforce dependency’ (Armstrong et al. 2011:30), putting IE into practice cannot rely on a one size fits all approach (Grimes, 2009). Translating international agendas into context appropriate national and local policy, and again developing policy into practice is a complex field of negotiation between stakeholders, from practitioners all the way up to the northern countries that fund the development of IE and education for all in southern countries.

### **Research Design**

As part of my doctoral research<sup>2</sup> into the transition experiences of street-connected children and youth leaving the streets in Kenya, 51 participants related their journeys into and away from street situations during semi-structured narrative interviews, conducted over two field work visits (a period of two months in 2012 and six-months in 2013). This paper also reports on a parallel study that aimed to explore the education system that the children involved in the PhD research, transition into, focusing on the extent to which access to formal schooling provides the social justice alluded to by global education agendas.

As a British teacher, and later researcher, I have a number of years’ experience of the role of community-based organisations, particularly with regards to informal education, working with street-connected children in Kenya (and Indonesia). I wanted to understand how Kenyan education policy provision for street-connected children related to the experiences of teachers. How did the teachers perceive the needs of the children returning to their classrooms and what did they consider to be the challenges that needed to be overcome? Therefore, this study combines an analysis of Kenyan policy documents with data collected during group interviews with eight Kenyan primary school teachers, conducted in 2012.

Three policies were chosen for analysis in this study. According to the Kenyan *National Special Needs Education Policy Framework* (NSNEPF) (KMOE, 2009) street-connected children are recognised as one of 22 categories<sup>1</sup> of SEN. Therefore, I am concerned both with the NSNEPF and Sessional Paper No.1 of 2005 on Education, Science and Technology (KMEST, 2005), which aimed to guide 20 years of education through reforms to ‘improve access, equity, quality and relevance of education and training at all levels’ (KMEST, 2004:4). In addition, I examined references to education made within the 2010 Kenyan Constitution.

To recruit teachers to participate in the study, I selected four primary schools in and around a provincial town in Central Kenya. The schools were chosen for their geographic proximity to each other and their facilities. Two of the schools were situated next to each other, near the centre of the town (school number 1 and 2), and two were on the outskirts of the town within and on the edge of a large slum area (school number 3 and 4). One school in each location has a SEN unit attached (school number 1 and 3): one for children with mild learning



difficulties, and the second for children with more severe learning difficulties. The head teachers were approached about the study and they found volunteers among the staff who wished to be involved. One group interview was conducted for each school, lasting approximately one hour. I chose this method as the teachers were not used to face-to-face interviews. At every school they expected to be given a questionnaire to fill in, which meant the beginning of each interview involved a discussion about what the interviews entailed. A group interview helped them to be more comfortable with the situation and provided opportunities for them to respond to each other's answers. The group interview also allowed them to agree and disagree with each other as part of the conversation, which was useful for me to establish a general understanding of the context. There were two teachers present for each.

The interviews were conducted in English using a semi-structured framework. Five main questions were provided in advance as part of participant information forms, and used to provide a general framework for the discussion. Other questions arose as part of the conversation. The questions aimed to elicit their understanding, thoughts and ideas with regards to IE, before exploring their experiences of including street-connected children in their classrooms.

### **The predominance of a deficit model of street-connectedness**

The presence of a special unit went some way to teachers' recognizing of the term 'Inclusive Education' – *elimu jumuishi* in Kiswahili. Only three of the teachers, all working in one or other of the two schools with units, had some grasp of the concept:

*For me I understand IE as where someone who is not at school we bring them to the system and have to assist them – so if we go and get them and bring to school to bring them to the system and bring them on board (Male teacher, school number 4)*

Part of each interview, therefore featured a discussion about the inclusion of children with disabilities into the mainstream classroom. In Kenya, if a teacher identifies a learning need, the child is taken to the district assessment centre where he/she is categorised as having one of four different types of disability: Mental handicap, Visual impairments, Hearing impairments, and Physical impairments. If the assessment officer feels that they cannot fit into a mainstream school, they are referred to a special school or unit depending on the need. The teachers were surprised that the Kenya Ministry of Education lists 22<sup>1</sup> types of SEN in the Special Needs Education policy, since assessment is only carried out for four categories (KMOE, 2009).

All of the teachers felt that being street-connected could be justified as a category of SEN, but when talking about what they do for such children returning to school from the street,

they did so mainly in socio-economic terms. They felt support should be in the form of basic needs provision such as clothing and shelter, a lack of which was given as a primary reason for children migrating to the street in the first place:

*You know they have a problem and a lack of love at home. You as a teacher, as a parent, you try to come in. It would not be real but you try to give this child the love he doesn't have...as individuals we give love and food (Female teacher, school number 1)*

*At times you go an extra mile... you can provide for them: maybe from the clothes your own children are too big for, shoes, and sometimes we buy food (Female teacher, school number 3)*

Their responses imply a deficit construction of street-connectedness, focusing in on deficiency and the negative, often behavioural aspects attributed to life on the street. The teachers also highlighted the fact that children returning from the street will often be addicted to cigarettes (the smoking of which in Kenyan schools results in suspension), glue and solvents, or other drugs such as *mira* (khat) or *bhang* (marijuana).

From the teachers' perspective, a feature being included as a category of SEN, did not immediately relate to learning needs and adapting teaching practice. This may be a result of a system that caters for children *assessed* as having learning needs with special schools and units away from mainstream classrooms. Therefore, if a child is categorised as a 'defective student' (Skrtric, 1991), differences in their behaviour, age or academic ability, would imply their removal to facilities more 'suited' to their needs (Skidmore, 1996). Therefore, when asked specifically how their classroom practice differed for street-connected children, their concerns did not immediately encompass learning.

The first policy developments for IE in Kenya were outlined by the Government in Sessional Paper No.1 of 2005 on Education, Science and Technology (Oketch and Ngware, 2010; Sang and Ndurumo, 2010; KMOE, 2009). The reforms it proposed were to start with the Kenya Education Sector Support Programme 2005-2010 (KESSP), which outlined five years of investment into special needs education including in-service training of both mainstream and special teachers. The KESSP recognised that the previously narrow focus on special schools and units for children with hearing, visual, mental or physical challenges failed to include other categories of need, but the main focus from a curriculum point of view was the development of alternatives for children and youth that are deemed unable to complete the standard Kenyan system (KMEST, 2004, 2005). There is a specific mention of the inclusion of vulnerable and street-connected children for example, and the government's policy to ensure that 'quality is at the core of all education programmes' (KMEST, 2004:7), but it does not necessarily advocate the inclusion of such children into mainstream schools as they are also mentioned under the heading of non-formal education, which provides skills training and vocational courses.



The Kenyan constitution, which was enacted on August 2010 states that every child has the right to free and compulsory basic education (article 53.1b). However, while both the constitution and the NSNEPF aim to increase the quality and access to education, article 54.1b of the constitution adds the stipulation ‘to the extent compatible with the interests of the person’ and 56b states that ‘minorities and marginalised groups are provided special opportunities in educational and economic fields’ (Kenya Constitution, 2010:41). In addition, the NSNEPF describes how policy is important in including learners with special needs into the ‘education system’ (KMOE, 2009:18). Therefore, neither document relates explicitly to the inclusion of such learners into regular schools, despite the aims of the sessional paper. There is no doubt that an inclusive approach to education can be costly and a country such as Kenya that is currently ranked at 143 (UNDP) in the Human Development Index will take time to implement the initiatives laid out in the 2005 sessional paper. But at face value Kenyan policies imply that a child must adapt to fit into the education system, or alternative arrangements are required: therefore reinforcing barriers produced by a deficit model.

The sessional paper may advocate for IE but it does not offer a framework for action in the same way as the NSNEPF. This is a concern for the success of IE as the use of special schools to segregate because of ‘deficiency or defect’ eventually legitimates special school placement (Ainscow et al. 2006:16), which limits provision of support within mainstream schools. The teachers interviewed did not explicitly mention the need for street-connected children and youth to attend alternative courses, such as non-formal vocational training, but there is a growing trend for non-governmental and community-based organisations to support older children, and primary school graduates through these pathways due to lower costs and shorter completion times. Such vocational training courses may enable street-connected children and youth to become financially self-sufficient in a shorter timeframe, but their options can be limited if positions are not available in their chosen vocation (Corcoran, 2013). Not completing primary and secondary school beforehand limits the capabilities achieved through education that are described by Terzi (2005) and Schimmel (2006).

Non-formal pathways, such as vocational training are specifically mentioned within the KESSP and it would not be surprising if such practice became explicit within Kenyan education policy. Elsewhere, Miles and Singal (2010) speak of a rise in such multiple systems of education, as students perceived to be different are directed into a parallel system rather than investing in raising the quality of the existing one. Such parallel systems also highlight the tendency of international organisations advocating for education for specific groups of children (e.g. those with disabilities) to focus predominantly on providing for that group rather than working to improve the quality of education for all children (Miles and Singal, 2010).

The conceptualisation of street-connectedness as a special educational need, and therefore a barrier to learning, is reinforced by the education system. In the teachers’ minds, ability and street-connectedness seemed to both line up and predict the other and they felt unprepared

adequately to teach the children arriving in their classrooms from the street:

*As teachers you are not trained to deal with children of lots of different abilities in your classroom. We can only teach the normal or average child (Male teacher, school number 4)*

*In colleges we are taught just to deal with an average child...we need in-service training. We do try to change, not from training, but because we want to try (Female teacher school number 3)*

Street-connected children did not fit the mould of the ‘normal’ or ‘average’ child and teachers in all four schools discussed the need for ‘remedial work’ as the main adaptation of their classroom practice. They also described how they must ‘go down to’ the child’s level, with one teacher stating that ‘maybe you [the teacher] are using a vocabulary that is too difficult’. Such stereotyping may resonate with Schimmel’s (2006) use of the capability framework to highlight the cognitive underdevelopment of street-connected children, but it does so in such a way that reinforces the deficit perception and misunderstands the children’s individual learning needs. Instances of formerly street-connected children who have gone on to university show that relative ability in school does not predetermine the likelihood that a child will drop out, or that they require ‘remedial work’ when they return. However, one teacher spoke about how disheartening it was to see a former student on the street as ‘he was bright’, but did not mention a difference of approach for such an individual returning to her class from the street.

### **Supporting teachers to develop the positives**

Childhood is a ‘sociocultural space’ (James 2007) open to (re)interpretation according to the context within which the child resides and how adults and children negotiate their ideas and experiences of being a child. As Scheper-Hughes and Sargent posit, childhood is a ‘primary nexus of mediation between public norms and private life’ (1998:1); but, in being street-connected, children often experience a greater degree of autonomy, and negotiations within this nexus imply a significant degree of fluidity. There is a continuum of possible relationships that children have with the street, the local community, wider society, the authorities and each other. The disabling mechanisms that exist, both on and off the street, affect the children in a variety of ways. Therefore, education systems should be responsive to the idea of a *street-connected childhood*, if such a description is possible, as being fluid in the context of circulations within ‘multiple physical and social locations’ (Stryker and Yngvesson, 2013:298). One way of reconceiving street-connectedness could be as a process of developing positive attributes.

Street life can be difficult and children and young people are able to build resilience and self-reliance through their experiences (Tum, 2006). The three children within Akpan’s *An Ex-mas*

*Feast* are able to negotiate the challenges of living in the slum and engaging with street-life to provide for their own needs and those of their family. Although exposed to the abuse and exploitation inherent to such hand-to-mouth living, the children take on strong roles in the story. They have developed their capabilities for survival and financial gain. The networking skills developed on the street can enable children and youth to become effective players in the informal labour market (Davies, 2008). However, their ability to develop skills and adapt to meet the challenges of daily survival is not usually actively engaged in the traditional teacher-led classroom. Negotiating the challenges and opportunities available on the street, implies the development of practical problem-solving and innovation, which would be best served in interactive learning environments and student-led activities.

However, such attributes appear to be unrecognised. Street-connected children are generally thought of in terms of deficit, and as such, the teachers professed their inability to cope with the diversity of learning needs within their classrooms. Street-connected children are consequently being introduced to learning environments that are not supportive of their needs, and they may struggle to do much more than underperform academically. For example, the breakdown of Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) results for 2010 highlight how age affects access to, completion of, and performance in primary education in Kenya. If a child starts school at the expected age of six they should sit their KCPE exam at age 13/14, but the 2010 results reveal that only 40% of candidates fell into this age bracket. A one year increase in age was associated with an average drop of 10-15 points in the mean score (Lewin et al. 2011). Over-age candidates can be explained by late entry to school, but also children dropping out and subsequently returning as a result of being on the street. Of course, this trend does not describe the performance of all children returning to school<sup>3</sup>, but the practice of sending street-connected children to current mainstream classrooms, without further input from the organisations assisting them, can be deemed as disabling. This is especially so for those children for whom education was the motivating factor for their initial migration to the street.

The teachers wanted to be able to better support street-connected children, and questioned the capacity of initial and continuing teacher education to adequately prepare for the diversity within a mainstream classroom. Such training was deemed especially important given that the provision of education for children falling within the four categories of disability assessed at the district office, does not necessarily include the full spectrum of possible learning needs found in the immediate community. Added to this, are the pressures of welcoming children who have possibly experienced the trauma of abuse and hunger on the streets:

*We get frustrated as teachers very much...You feel that you are not trained. Is it that we don't understand? We try to understand the problem (Female teacher, school number 4)*

Initial teacher training and continuing professional development may raise awareness of the need for inclusive education approaches to learners such as street-connected children in the

classroom, but they cannot, on their own, instigate lasting change. Lewis (2014) outlines five key strategies to prepare mainstream teachers for teaching diverse classes. At the heart of her argument, is the need for dialogue. Beyond the teachers' own first-line responses, the only assistance available to the children (according to the teachers themselves) were local civil-society and community-based organisations working with street-connected children. It is with these organisations that first steps in communication can be developed, to better understand the experiences of street-connected children and break down the barriers created by the dominance of a deficit model. I believe that collaborative working should follow on from conversations between schools and organisations to assist in easing street-connected children's transitions from the streets, and advocate for a change in media-based and public appreciation of who street-connected children are. By working to change the discursive tendency to homogenise street-connected children, and therefore essentialise their identity as lacking, policy can be influenced to provide resources and teacher education that better supports the children.

### **Conclusions: Challenging the deficit model of street-connectedness**

I began this article with the idea that being street-connected is constructed as analogous to a disabling childhood, in that it denies access to formal school-based education. Using the capabilities framework, Terzi (2005) and Schimmel (2006) argue that this lack of access prevents the development of functioning capabilities by limiting the structural freedoms that they can exercise in society. Consequently, interventions prioritise the removal of children from the street and into schools. However, the predominance of a deficit model influences the alignment of street-connectedness with a lack of academic ability by teachers who feel unable to support the learning of children transitioning (back) to mainstream classrooms, which compounds their marginalisation by further stigmatising street-connected children. Therefore to some extent, formal education systems can be as disabling as being street-connected; especially given that children are moving from an existence of relative autonomy to the constraints of a teacher-led classroom. Organisations should therefore be more critical of the interventions that they promote and collaborate with teachers to prevent further marginalisation of those they seek to assist.

Further research should focus on the in-depth experiences of street-connected children and their teachers to develop effective recommendations that will exploit the children's resilience and improve both the children's involvement in their own education as well as their relative academic performance. I advocate for increased interaction between the organisations providing non-formal catch-up education while the children are in residential transition centres, which are often more interactive than mainstream classrooms, and the schools eventually receiving those children, so both sides can learn how to better support the children as they make the transition from the street. These conversations should be developed to increase advocacy for street-connected children to change deficit attitudes towards this

population and influence more effective social policy.

## Notes

1. Currently recognised categories of Special Education Need, taken from the National Special Needs Education Policy Framework (KMOE 2009): Hearing impairments, Visual impairments, Physical impairments, Cerebral palsy, Epilepsy, Mental handicaps, Downs Syndrome, Autism, Emotional and behavioural disorders, Learning disabilities (LD), Speech and language disorders, Multiple handicaps, Albinism, Other health impairments, Are gifted and talented, Are deafblind, Are orphaned, Are abused, **Are living in the streets**, Are heading households, Are of nomadic / pastoral communities, Are Internally displaced.
2. Funded by ESRC (grant code ES/J500094/1).
3. It is not possible to generalise the performance of street-connected children returning to school. They vary in their academic abilities and individuals may experience one or a combination of different possible factors that affect both home and school life.

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