

An Exploration of Children's Self-concept and Well-being in two urban communities of the Western Cape; A Child Participation Study



ELIZABETH BENNINGER, PHD CANDIDATE
THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE

Background & Rationale

- ▶ Children in South Africa faced with conditions of poverty (over 50% live in poverty)
- ▶ Conditions of violence could have a negative impact on the way children think and feel about themselves
- ▶ Limited opportunities & resources for a child's well-being
- ▶ Key factors for child well-being: Social support, coping skills, self-concept

The Self-concept & Violence

- ▶ The self-concept = the way a person thinks and feels about their abilities, traits and worth
- ▶ Environment, culture, history all shape the way children are treated
- ▶ Treatment becomes a part of how children think about themselves.
- ▶ Violence can result in negative feelings around the self and can lead to aggressive behaviours or challenges with emotions, especially if the situation is not easy to talk about (such as sexual abuse)

Study Aim

The Aim of the study was to explore how children construct and assign meaning to the self and how this influences their perceptions of their well-being within two communities in the Cape Flats region of Cape Town

Participants & Sampling

- ▶ 54 participants from the greater Lavender Hill and Khayelitsha communities ages 9-12 (26 girls and 28 boys)
- ▶ Group one: Levona Primary School, Lavender Hill
- ▶ Group two: Philisa Abafazi Bethu, Lavender Hill
- ▶ Group three: Kuyasa Primary School, Khayelitsha
- ▶ Group four: Waves for Change, Khayelitsha

Data Collection Tools

- ▶ **Child reference group:** Team of 10 co-researchers, 5 from Lavender Hill, 5 from Khayelitsha, who assisted with the entire project
- ▶ **Focus group sessions:** a total of 8 sessions, open conversations around how children think and feel about themselves and how this influences their well-being
- ▶ **Community Map:** Activity where children drew a map of their communities, including the spaces and places which influenced the way they think about themselves
- ▶ **Photovoice:** Activity where children were provided with cameras and instructed to take photos of people, places, and things related to their self-concept and well-being

Themes

- ▶ Childhood
- ▶ Social connectedness
- ▶ Children's Activities
- ▶ Children's Spaces

Underlying feelings of **vulnerability** & **helplessness** constructed around a **need for safety**

Childhood

- ▶ Agreed upon idea of childhood was not always the reality of being a young person in their communities
- ▶ Ideal child-identity: you are able to play safely outside, go to school, adults provide your basic needs, and you have opportunities to learn new things with your friends
- ▶ Childhood reality: Unable to play safely outside, abuse and use by the elders in the community, and expectation to take on adult ksuch as looking after younger siblings, running errands, cleaning, and cooking for the adults
 - ▶ **For the participants who had caring and supportive adults in the home, at school, or at an after-school programme, it was much easier to consider themselves children because they could feel a sense of safety and security and had the opportunity to play safely with friends**



Childhood

- ▶ “To be a child to me is nice because you have parents looking after you, and keep you away from dangerous things like the gangsters, for example when they fight they tell us to come inside at home. So it’s nice to be a child and you don’t have to wake up and go to work, you just have to wake up, wash and go to school, eat before and take your backpack and go. (Female Participant, Khayelitsha, group 1)”
- ▶ “There are gangsters and they are doing all kinds of things with the children. They are raping the children and that kind of stuff.” (Female participant, Lavender Hill, Group 1).
- ▶ “In our community there is children, small my age, who are selling drugs to people. The gangster leaders who threaten them to sell the stuff” (Male Participant, Lavender Hill, Group 2)
- ▶ “It is not safe for the children, because even a girl that is not a gangster, they will shoot her also” (Lavender Hill, Group 1)
- ▶ “The children are feeling unsafe. If they want to play outside they need someone to protect them.” (Lavender Hill, Group 2)
- ▶ “I don’t think Lavender Hill is a place for children, because they shooting the whole time and I think a child is one that is always with their parents and is never rude.” (Lavender Hill, Group 2)
- ▶ (*Why do you think there is so much fighting? What makes you feel so angry?*) Because we are kids, we are angry because we are kids (Khayelitsha, Group 2)

Social Connectedness

- ▶ The participants' responses discussed the different identities which they have within different social situations
- ▶ Self-identity created around a sense of connectedness to specific groups and individuals
- ▶ **Connection to school and a children's programme was stronger for the participants who had the support of caring adults, supervision, opportunities for learning new skills, and positive peer groups**
- ▶ Engaging in play, sports, and the arts with peers contributed positively to the participants' self-constructions and resulted in more prosocial behaviour
- ▶ Engaging with peers through the use of activities such as gang membership, violence, crime, smoking, and drinking had a mixed impact, (For example some children felt cool when using drugs or strong when using violence)
- ▶ Sense of future self-identity connected to career aspiration associated with interest, skill, or parental influence
- ▶ Strong sense of empathy and understanding for the situation of their peers



Social Connectedness

- ▶ “There is children who is looking at the people and they are smoking and stuff and when they are big they also want to do it.” (Lavender Hill, Group 2)
- ▶ “I felt actually nice because I thought I was the best person there. I also was having cigarette contests for who could smoke the fastest and I also usually won” (Lavender Hill, Group 1)
- ▶ “A long time ago, I was playing with these friends and thought they were the right friends but they were not. They took me in the wrong direction. Like fighting with other kids.” (Lavender Hill, Group 1)
- ▶ “There was a time with my friends, after we were surfing a car was passing by and one of my friends fell badly and he injured himself so now I feel sorry for him and sometimes I feel like I should tell him that I am sorry for the fact that he fell” (Khayelithsa, Group 2)
- ▶ “ I feel very bad because these people, they are burning their house, they are wronging them, they still, the people help them. Because the Somalians they sell things for us and we buy them. But when they burn their houses, what would we do without them?” (Khayelithsa, Group 1)



Children's Spaces



- ▶ **Children's spaces** largely constructed around their vulnerability within an unsafe space versus their opportunities for escape. **The community as a whole was viewed to be a space of danger and an unfit space for children**
- ▶ **Good Spaces:** school, children's programmes, sports fields, churches, safe places outside of the community, and the homes with supervision and care
- ▶ **Bad Spaces:** the places of violence, such as the flats where the gangsters were often shooting, the drug houses, the streets, the parks, abusive or unsupervised home environments, schools where bullying & fighting takes place, dirty areas
- ▶ **Key ingredients to a positive environment:** Support and care from adults, positive friends, opportunities for learning, adequate supervision & guidance

Children's Spaces

“Building more safe places for children will make children think positively about themselves because they will feel like adults are thinking about them and care about the things that are important to them.” (Lavender Hill, Group 2)



- ▶ **“I feel bad in this area, it's like when you sleeping at night. It's almost as if you hear the bullets go over your head the whole time. It gives me bad dreams and then I can't sleep at night and am awake the whole night”** (Lavender Hill, Group 1)
- ▶ **“When I'm at home I always feel safe”** (Khayelitsha, group 2)
- ▶ **“I feel happy there at home, because there is my mother, no one can bully me or hit me.”** (Khayelitsha, group 2)
- ▶ **“What I don't like is being teased about my head and discriminated because the other thing is that I'm fat and some kids say am finishing the school's food, I don't like this and it's not their problem if my head looks so square, it's not their problem”** (Khayelitsha, Group 1)
- ▶ **“The thing that makes me not like my community is because there are people eating drugs because drugs are wrong, so I don't like drugs. And when I'm older I don't want to smoke drugs”** (Khayelitsha, Group 1)
- ▶ **“I feel that I'm not very safe at all. I'm not safe at all”** (Khayelitsha, group 1)
- ▶ **“This is the court where we live. Here is where we see the dead bodies. Sometimes they are left there for days.”** (Lavender Hill, Group 2)



Children's Activities



- ▶ The participants tended to portray themselves in terms of the activities which they were good at in or those which they found to be exciting or fun (surfing, netball, soccer, rugby, cricket, skateboarding, playing instruments, dancing, singing, and skipping rope)
- ▶ The identification with the activities was also largely related to the gender norms of the community
- ▶ The activities additionally were used as a means of physically escaping the violence or for maintaining a positive sense of self in the face of violence and abuse

Children's Activities

- ▶ “I feel happy when I surf. When I'm not at Waves for Change I feel angry, because when you don't surf you feel angry” (Male, Khayelitsha, Group 2)
- ▶ Coach when I'm not here surfing, I don't feel good because loads of people like to stab each other and there is more violence (Khayelitsha, Male, Group 2)
- ▶ “When I leave the house and come mostly here, I feel quite good because I am playing the Marimba's and when I go back home I don't feel so good because of the fighting and stuff. But once I come back here and then I feel so good and maybe like am going to the shop or somewhere even its near here as long as I am away from the house I feel good.” (Lavender Hill, Group 1)
- ▶ “I love to ride skate board, and if they shooting, I ride away with my skateboard and if they finish, I come out again with the skate board (Lavender Hill, Group 1)



Children's recommendations

"Good programmes will make sure children are safe"

- ▶ Safety- all children **MUST** be safe from shooting and from abuse
- ▶ Opportunities for play with friends
- ▶ Helpful, loving, and respectful people
- ▶ Food
- ▶ Bed to sleep in if sick
- ▶ Opportunity to learn new things
- ▶ Adult supervision to keep kids safe, to play with kids, give advice, and take kids seriously
- ▶ Adults teach children to respect each other
- ▶ Adults to play with kids
- ▶ Activities such as music, sports (soccer, surfing), dancing, art, singing
- ▶ Resources for school (stationary, uniform, homework support)
- ▶ Opportunities to leave community and experience new things
- ▶ Animals
- ▶ "You can talk your problems to, and if someone did something to you at school, you can tell an adult, and if something happened to you, you can run to an adults and tell what happened to you. If someone hit you , you must run to an adult"



Implications for interventions

- ▶ Targeted on the individual, community, and structural levels (policies, social services available etc.)
- ▶ Interventions and activities work towards building places of safety and in promoting peaceful individuals and communities
- ▶ Programmes must address inequalities and poor service delivery
- ▶ Adult supervision with adults providing safety, help with conflict, and empathy
- ▶ Opportunities for engaging with peers around healthy behaviours
- ▶ Include opportunities for

- ▶ learning
- ▶ gaining skills to cope with challenges & setting goal setting
- ▶ practice new healthy behaviours
- ▶ promote a sense of hope and belief in one's abilities

