**Voices of youth in an Ethiopian NGO's educational program:
A holistic view at enabling factors
Paroles de jeunes sur les facteurs de soutien d'un programme éducatif d'une ONG
éthiopienne**

Nathalie Piquemal, University of Manitoba

Abstract

This paper explores the impact that a Canadian NGO's supported educational programs in Ethiopia have had on orphaned and vulnerable young people, socially, emotionally, and academically, as experienced, storied and understood by the children and adolescents themselves. Using Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bio-ecological theory of human development as a theoretical framework and qualitative inquiry, specifically semi-structured interviews with 37 children and youths between 9 and 17 years old, as a methodological framework, this study explores factors that promote empowerment, resilience, and hope through students' experiences and perceptions in these NGO's educational programs. Discussion includes reflection gender, social justice, and implications for practice for Canadian educators who work with vulnerable youths, such as war-affected students.

Resumé

Ce texte explore l'impact des programmes éducatifs d'une ONG canadienne en Éthiopie sur des jeunes orphelins et vulnérables, sur les plans du social, de l'émotionnel et du scolaire, tel que vécu, raconté et compris par les enfants et adolescents eux-mêmes. À partir de la théorie bio-écologique du développement humain de Bronfenbrenner (2005), et à travers une méthode de recherche qualitative utilisant des entrevues semi-structurées avec 37 jeunes âgés de 9 à 17 ans, cette étude explore les facteurs qui soutiennent l'autonomisation, la résilience, et l'espoir de ces jeunes dans les programmes éducatifs de cette ONG. La discussion propose une réflexion sur le genre, la justice sociale, et les implications pratiques pour les éducateurs canadiens qui travaillent avec des jeunes vulnérables, tels que les étudiants touchés par les guerres.

Keywords: International education, development, human rights, NGOs, poverty

Mots-clés: éducation internationale; développement; droits de l'homme; ONGs; pauvreté

Introduction

The role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in alleviating poverty in Africa has been largely documented in popular media and in community-based reports (mainly done by NGOs themselves), but has not been the object of much attention in scholarly research. Researchers who have conducted studies on this topic have generally looked at the following three fields: health, education, and economic development (Jianxiu, 2006; Meyer, 1996, Saint-Martin, 1994). In particular, Jianxiu contends that NGOs have become efficient in "bringing social transformation, economic advancement, and for furthering democratic governance" (p. 17). In the field of education, NGOs are described as "allies" (Blackburn, 1998) in the development of classroom materials, long-term relationships in ongoing community-projects, and general fundraising initiatives. A comprehensive study conducted on NGO provision and basic education (Rose, 2007) shows that NGOs play a key role in supporting education delivery for the excluded, thus pointing to the reality of educational exclusion. This study posits that educational

exclusion is a multilayered phenomenon, affecting children because of intersecting social conditions such as gender, orphans, child soldiers, child labourers, and socio-economic status. A common denominator of the strategies developed by NGOs to provide education to the excluded in developing countries is the development of alternative approaches to State Education, which may include small class size, flexible timetable, child-centered pedagogy, and complementary courses/approaches (Torres, 2001; Charlick, 2005; Mfum-Mensah, 2003).

However, there is a dearth of research documenting, with depth, the impact of NGOs' ongoing educational work on the lives of those who most need to benefit from this work, namely the children. Children in NGO educational programs, and, in particular, orphaned and vulnerable children, deserve research attention because of their unique educational needs due to poor and sometimes "war-affected and disrupted schooling backgrounds" (Kanu, 2008, p. 917), their unique difficulty to remain in schools due to health and family disruptions, and the under-documented impact on NGOs on the lives of these children.

With these research needs in mind, this paper reports on the findings of a study conducted for Canadian Humanitarian (CH), a nongovernmental organization which works to assist "disadvantaged children and their families break free from the cycle of poverty" (CH, 2012). The overall purpose of the study was to explore the impact that some of the local NGOs' educational programs, which are supported by CH, have had on orphaned and vulnerable children, socially, emotionally, and academically, as experienced, storied and understood by the children themselves. This study aims at better understanding the children's experiences and perceptions of the programs of CH's Ethiopian partner, with special attention to personal contexts (self and family), relational contexts (relationships with peers and teachers, sense of belonging and attachment in the program), pedagogical contexts (perception of academic experience), and social contexts (perception of self in community and society). This study was framed to respond to a request¹ from the local Ethiopian partners of CH. The specific research questions that guide this study are:

- What are the children's experiences and perceptions of their education since enrolment in CH's program, with special attention to relational and pedagogical contexts?
- What are the children's experiences and perceptions of CH's impact on their lives and the lives of their household members? What impact, if any, can children articulate around the role of CH in their own sense of well-being?
- What impact, if any, has participation in CH's programs had on how children view themselves in relation to others, as well as how they view their future role in their community and society?

This study hypothesizes that CH plays a key role in enabling children to experience social inclusion.

¹ As an advocate of CH, I am aware of the potential conflict of interest that could have impacted the objectivity of this study. However, I believe that CH's local Ethiopian partner directed this study to me precisely because I do not work for CH, nor is this study funded by CH.

Context of the study

Ethiopia, known as the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, is a country located in the Eastern part of Africa, with a population of over 84,000,000 inhabitants. Its capital is Addis Ababa. Ethiopia is often referred to as “the cradle of civilization.” It was a monarchy for much of its past, but now follows a federal republic political system. The world also knows Ethiopia as a country that underwent famine in the 1980s. While the country has begun to recover, the country as a whole continues to suffer from poverty. As statistically documented by UNICEF, Ethiopia has one of the largest populations of orphans in the world: “Many of these children don’t have access to basic rights such as proper care, education, psychological support and supervision. Often, orphans and other vulnerable children are forced to work to earn an income. They are exposed to various forms of exploitation, including sexual exploitation” (UNICEF, 2006). UNICEF further reports: “Ethiopia counts one of the largest populations of orphans in the world: 13 per cent of children throughout the country are missing one or both parents. This represents an estimated 4.6 million children – 800,000 of whom were orphaned by HIV/AIDS” (UNICEF, 2006).

In response to these crises, CH, a non-religious, non-political organization created in 2003, works “to break the cycle of poverty by providing orphaned and vulnerable children and their families with access to health care, education, vocational training, and the basic necessities of life such as nutrition and shelter” (Canadian Humanitarian, 2012). CH, which obtained its charitable status in 2004, is the sole funder for each of the project partners, all of which are autonomous Ethiopian NGOs and are fully sanctioned by their local and regional governments. The local NGO is the entity running the program with CH providing the funding as well as capacity building and direction. The central focus of CH is the child, as the vision is “to see every child reach their full potential through innovative, sustainable community development models that empower local initiatives” (CH, 2012).

Five educational centers/school participated in this study: three educational and support centres and two schools, one of which functioned both as a school and as a support centre and the other functioned as a school only. These are:

- (1) Kid’s Hope Alemgana Youth Center, a sub-city close to Addis Ababa, functions as an after-school education center for 50-60 children between the ages of 5 and 18.
- (2) Kid’s Hope Gullele Youth Center, located in Addis Ababa, functions as an after-school education center for 50-60 children between the ages of 5 and 18.

Both Kid’s Hope centers offer before and after school tutoring, drama, dancing, music and art clubs. The staff includes nurses, social workers, teachers, and managers.

- (3) PATH Ethiopia Center, located in a slum area of Addis Ababa, offers before and after school tutoring to 60 students between the ages of 5 and 18, with special attention to literacy, computer, and academic skills, as well as vocational opportunities. The staff also includes nurses, social workers, teachers, and managers who work closely with local schools and households.
- (4) Light for Generation Association (LiGA) School, located on the edge of Addis Ababa in a semi-rural area, is an accredited Kindergarten school and offers a preschool and kindergarten program to over two hundred children who are between three and five

years old. The children, along with their families, were relocated to this community after their homes were demolished in Addis Ababa to make way for new construction.

- (5) Bright for Every Kid Association (BEKA) School, located in Gindo Town in the Oromia region, 144 kms southwest of Addis Ababa, offers an education program to fifty children between the ages of 5 and 10, and after school educational support, as well as income generating scheme for their guardians and access to clean water.

All these schools and centers also provide a hot meal a day, as well as tuition, books, clothing, access to health care, counseling, and some assistance to foster households. The children enrolled in these programs are orphans, having lost one or both parents. Overall the causes of death are health related, of which probably 80 % can be connected to HIV/AIDS. The other 20 % are due to accidental death, or other health crisis /infectious disease that resulted in premature death (Canadian Humanitarian, 2012). The children are usually with grandparents (primarily women), aunts, uncles, older siblings or neighbours. They live in homes that are generally deprived of running water and electricity. Many of them had interrupted schooling experiences due to the fact that their guardians could not afford the tuition fees. Their education is fully supported by CH until completion of Grade 10, at which point they take the National Exam. The score obtained in this exam determines the students' future educational prospects, which include the university stream, college and technical school, and vocational training. Through its Scholarship Program, Canadian Humanitarian funds students to pursue their education during one stream of study, after which students are expected to become independent.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework used for this study was Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bio-ecological theory of human development which is structured around the five following factors: the individual (the child); the microsystem (such as the family or the classroom), the mesosystem (interaction of two microsystems such as the center or the school and the family), the exosystem (external environment), and the macrosystem (broader socio-cultural context). In this study, Bronfenbrenner's model includes the child's perceptions of home life, perceptions of life in school/center, perceptions of relationships with peers and with educators, perceptions of pedagogical practices and of educational experiences, perceptions of change (pre and post enrolment in the program), perceptions of broader social contexts and personal ideologies. Bronfenbrenner's theory enables a holistic look at children and youth, taking into account different intersecting factors and forces that may impact how these young people make sense of their own lives in the specific context of CH's programs.

Methodological framework

This study follows the principles and assumptions of qualitative inquiry, meaning that human experiences, perceptions, and interpretations are at the heart of the data collected, that meaning is socially constructed, and that the process is inductive rather than deductive (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978; Creswell, 1998). Such research focuses on subjectivity in relation to a specific phenomenon, namely children's perceptions of their social and educational experiences, and how they make meaning of these experiences. Narrative accounts and responses to open-ended questions constitute the type of qualitative data that is needed to extract commonalities and trends for the purpose of understanding of the aforementioned phenomenon. Data

analysis began with individual text and moved toward general patterns through a process of interpretive analysis.

Procedures

Research participants and research instrument

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather the data. I conducted all the interviews with the help of two interpreters, and with the additional support and contribution of the local coordinator of CH's programs in terms of initial contact with the children, visits to the participating children's families, and understanding of the broader social, cultural and political system of Ethiopia. Each interview was conducted in a quiet place within the school or center and lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes. Each interview was recorded and later transcribed by me. All personal identifiers were removed from the transcripts. No names are communicated in this paper, even though direct quotes are used. The data was analyzed according to emerging themes within the aforementioned theoretical framework. I interviewed 37 children and adolescents who were between nine and seventeen years old, 21 of whom were girls and 16 of whom were boys. Each has been given a pseudonym to protect their privacy, which is referred to in the findings section.

Free and informed consent

In accordance with local protocols and local social contexts, it appeared that verbal and face-to-face relational recruitment practices were key. CH's Ethiopian partner's ethical protocols revolve around conversations and verbal agreements whereby families may ask questions, and the consultant responds and clarifies. Oral consent ensured that families did not feel intimidated by a written format. Indeed, the child's legal representatives might feel pressured to sign a form, as a written format could be interpreted as oppressive and authoritative given the impact of extreme poverty on literacy skills. The Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (2010), which governs Canadian universities' research ethics procedures, contains a section on the various ways in which free and informed consent (verbal or written) may be sought and documented, making it possible to bridge a potential divide between two distinct contexts.

Researcher's ethical stance

My own positioning with respect to CH is that of a volunteer. I have not been employed by CH to conduct this study. I referred earlier to my position as being that of an advocate only to mean that I am not neutral, but, rather, that I hold a positive bias about the work done by CH.

Given the sensitive nature of the data collected, and given that the research participants were vulnerable both from a legal standpoint (under legal age) and from a social standpoint (extreme poverty), I chose to primarily follow a strength-based approach, meaning that the questions were formulated in a way that invited the children to reflect on enabling (positive experiences) rather than disabling (negative experiences) factors. In this context, enabling factors are defined as conditions that facilitate the children's access to, and equitable participation in, education, as well as conditions that alleviate extreme poverty for those children and their household members. In order to

highlight the extent to which CH's funded programs have had a positive impact on the children, I devoted some questions to the transitional phase between pre and post entry to NGO program. Each child was invited to reflect on past experiences, and prior difficulties before enrolment.

Many of these young people experienced sadness and sometimes stress when thinking back about what life was like before entering the program. With principles of human dignity and care at the heart of this study, I decided to limit, to a great extent, the sharing of these experiences. Data gathered at the expense of a child's emotional well-being is not worth gathering. Therefore, while I gratefully listened to moving stories of pain and resilience when these stories were spontaneously shared with me, I immediately offered to switch topics or refrained from asking certain questions when I detected any sign of stress. Evidently, participants had the right to refuse answering questions without having to provide an explanation; however, sometimes, not being asked the question is easier than having to refrain from answering it. Findings are nonetheless pertinent and authentic, as statements such as "I never tasted my mother's love," "I don't want to remember," or "Shall I talk about rape, prostitution?" speak volume and require no probing or elaboration.

Findings

The findings are organized around the following key themes: School in light of home demands; gender; social exclusion; social inclusion; empowerment; and, social consciousness. These themes were articulated according to emerging themes within Bronfenbrenner's aforementioned framework, meaning that the children's narrative accounts are analyzed with special attention to the different social and relational layers that shape their educational experiences. Each theme is illustrated by quotes and claims that represent the majority of the participants. In those cases where exceptions were found (for example, in the section about gender), these exceptions were clearly identified as representing a minority voice, suggesting, perhaps, a need to further investigate the issue at stake.

Self and home life: "Between home duties and school demands"

"It is my duty to help my grandmother." (Zahra, 14, Alemgana)

"First, I help my family, then I study." (Ayna, 12, PATH)

The way in which the majority of respondents described themselves and their home lives is two-fold: (1) School work; (2) Household work or contribution to the household income. Sometimes, "playing with friends" was mentioned, but it was always mentioned as being secondary to school and household work, and it was mentioned by a few children only.

First, all the children interviewed talked with much enthusiasm and commitment about school: "I love to go to school, my education is very important to me; I study even if I am sick" declares Tarik, 10, from PATH. The children's commitment to their education is further illustrated by some of their relatives' comments that I gathered during home visits. For example, the grandfather of a 15 year-old girl reported that the only way that his granddaughter would stop studying at night in order to get some rest was when he turned the light off.

Second, all the children interviewed described their home life in terms of the role and function that they perceived to fulfil in their families, meaning the tasks and activities that contribute to a functioning household. Children, as young as nine years old, worked to assist their families with tasks including fetching water, cooking, cleaning, going to the market to buy goods, or working to earn a small income (e.g., shining shoes). For example, when asked what she does to help at home, 10 year old Zenabi from the LiGA program stated that she helped her grandmother, washed the dishes, cleaned the house and made the bed.

Gender and home life

Noticeably, while all children interviewed reported that school work was a central activity at home, gender seemed to play a significant role in terms of the extent to which household work was central, secondary or seemingly inexistent (not mentioned) in their home life. Indeed, almost all girls (over 95 %) reported doing household chores first, then studying afterwards, while almost all boys (over 92 %) reported doing homework, less than half of whom reported doing household chores after schoolwork. When prompted, the boys would explain, “the main tasks are done by my sisters but if there is labour related work, we [the boys] help” (Ali, 14, Gullele). However, when further prompted, many of the boys who admitted not doing any household chores would also explain that they worked outside of their home (for example, shoe shining) to help increase the household income.

While gender seems to dictate roles (who performs what) in many Ethiopian homes, what needs to be outlined is that the majority of the children interviewed, boys and girls alike, reported working for the benefit of their household. Most girls do household related chores, while most boys, although often not expected to do any household related chores, do so anyway (less than 50 %) and/or work to earn an income (a little over 50 %). While it may be that societal norms markedly influence gender roles, this study also shows that individual context and circumstances sometimes generate their own set of a home’s social organization. For example, Zion (14, from Alemgena), who had lost both his parents and whose sister had become the head of the family in her teens, described his home as a very loving environment in which everyone worked together to maintain the home, and, seemingly so, regardless of gender: “We have love at home, my life at home is great. We have harmony in the family. We all work and help each other and each contribute to the chores equally.” Sex role differentiation is shaped by complex and intersecting factors, including political orientations, social stratification, inequity in educational opportunities (Sudarkasa, 1982; Obanya, 2004), as well as individual contexts and stories of disempowerment and re-empowerment.

Life and perception of life before the program: “social exclusion”

“I don’t want to remember!” (Zoreen, 17, Gullele)

“I never tasted my mother’s love.” (Ayana, 9 BEKA)

Social exclusion is defined as “a multidimensional process of progressive social rupture, detaching groups and individuals from social relations and institutions and preventing them from full participation in the normal, normatively prescribed activities of the society in which they live” (Silver, 2007, p. 15). The following statements summarize the essence of the phenomenon of social exclusion as experienced by the children prior to

CH involvement: “Before here I didn’t have anywhere to go. I love [my life] here. My life was difficult before I came to the center. We had no money, I couldn’t buy clothes. I didn’t have friends” (Tsegie, 17, PATH). Educational exclusion was rampant as well: “My grandmother couldn’t afford it [to send me to school], so I stayed home” (Ellie, 9, BEKA).

These children’s life circumstances include losing one or both parents, living in extreme poverty, a high risk of child labour abuse or of being introduced to prostitution for income, and having limited to no educational opportunity. Life was extremely difficult, and sometimes unbearably filled with hopelessness, insecurity, hunger, and suffering. The United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child (Office of the United Nations’ High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1990) spells out the essential rights that children are entitled to: the right to survival; to develop to the fullest; to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation; and to participate fully in family, cultural and social life. The children felt these rights were compromised.

Life and perception of life in the program in contrast to pre-enrolment: Social inclusion

The positive impact of the students’ participation in one of CH’s supported programs revolves around six major themes, which are all related to social inclusion, defined as the process that enables individuals to participate in, and benefit from, the essential activities and services of their society. These themes include: the privilege of schooling, pedagogical support, structural support, relational support, support to the family, and a sense of equality with peers. The findings are generally consistent across all schools and centers, except in the area of emotional attachment to the school, which I discuss first.

While all students interviewed spoke with much conviction about the educational benefits of their participation in the centers or the schools, not all of them identified emotional benefits. In one of the two schools run by CH, the children did not report experiencing (nor did they report not experiencing it) an emotional support. It was simply not mentioned, while it was spontaneously talked about, and wholeheartedly so, in the other school and centers. These children did, however, make it clear that they liked their education, and that they were grateful for the daily meal. From an external and purely subjective viewpoint, these children seemed withdrawn and with a yet to be achieved sense of belonging to the school. This could be due to the fact that the purpose of a school is much different from the purpose of a center, which focuses more on individualized support and tutoring (therefore lending itself more to relationship building than in a school). Indeed, at the time of data collection, this particular school did not have a support center and had a very large number of students. As such, one could hypothesize that, because of large classes and the absence of an educational support center, this school did not lend itself well to creating close relationships between teachers and students.

The privilege of schooling

“There is a very big change in my life since I started the program. Before, I wasn’t even going to school. Now I go to school.” (Meena, 14, Alemgena)

Attending school was perceived by all boys and girls interviewed as an opportunity that they were immensely grateful for, particularly given that many of them did not have the chance to go to school (or if they did, it was under such hardship that they could not enjoy the benefits of an education) prior their enrolment in CH’s supported program.

These children did not describe their school participation as a human right, but rather as a privilege, such as a second chance in life. They are too well aware of the hardships that are inherent in their country, and the associated risks of social exclusion with limited to no access to education and economic participation: “Before I entered the program it was even more difficult. Not only food was hard to find but education was hard to get too. My family could not afford to send me to school” (Maya, 15, Alemgena)

Pedagogical and structural support

“The teachers explain well. They provide us with anything we need.” (Adina, 12, LiGA)

The students value their teachers’ pedagogical approaches: “The teachers here are perfect!” claims Dawit, 10, from Gullele. Competence is described in terms of punctuality, patience and student-centered teaching strategies. The students enrolled in the centers explained that they value the possibility to work in smaller groups (as opposed to 70 to 80 students per class), which allows more interpersonal interactions and individualized teaching strategies. They also value the possibility to work within an open-ended schedule, which helps create trusting and caring relationships with teachers and with peers: “We have activities here in groups that help us build the bond,” explains 17 year-old Fasil. Lastly, most of the students mentioned the possibility to thrive thanks to educational material support such as the library and computers, and thanks to the provisions given to their family each month.

Relational support

“The love and affection that we are all given from the teachers and the organization makes us feel like brothers and sisters.” (Nahla, 17, Gullele)

The vast majority of the people interviewed explain that they value the teachers’ caring and respectful attitude towards them, in that they can confide in them and they do not face any type of abuse such as yelling or beating. “I like the way they teach here because they give more encouragement here. They also give advice in a gentle way,” explains Abai, 16, from Alemgena. A closer look at the data shows that there is some level of ‘qualitative correlation’ between the value placed on the relational support (particularly emotional support), and a perceived absence of emotional stability at home (except for the school in which the emotional support was not identified). In other words, those children who reported suffering from an emotional void at home tended to emphasize the importance of an emotional support significantly more so than those who did not report suffering from an emotional void at home. For example, a 12 year-old girl who told me, “people argue in my family and it makes me sad, also reported “most of all, I like the affection from the staff here” (Alemgena).

Equality with peers

“Every provision and every service is equal for all of us. In this center it’s equal, in our society it is not equal.” (Malika, 17, Gullele)

The sense of attachment and belonging to the center, as well as the students’ general self-esteem, sense of wellbeing and self-worth are strongly tied to the lived experience and perception of equality among peers. Genat, 12, from Alemgena states: “Because, I am from a poor family, the other people who have more, I am not comfortable with them. They have a stigma of me. So I don’t spend time with them because they don’t want to be with me. But here, I feel equal [to the others].” Given that many of them have lived with

a sense of inequality, not to mention social exclusion, since they were born, they have become very attuned to any situation that exacerbates unequal treatments, as when inequality becomes visible (clothing, house, school material), social exclusion runs rampant. Dawit, 17, from PATH explains it in the following way: "Those who are here [at the center] are my closest friends, because they are from the same community and we have more in common. At school, some of them [students] are well dressed. It makes me uncomfortable. It hurts if most of them are well dressed and I am not. Here, at this center, we are all the same." Given its focus on orphaned and vulnerable children, CH and its supported NGOs have enabled these children to experience social inclusion, which leads to increased self-esteem.

Support to the family

"The only source of income is what we receive from the center" (Louam, 17, PATH).

Most of the children interviewed never failed to mention the benefits of their enrolment with CH's funded programs for their family as a whole. Indeed, while the children appreciate being fed at the center or at the school, they also like to know that their families are given support. As Marika, 16, from Gullele states, "My family is fed now. And I don't have to worry about us being hungry."

Life and perception of self in community and society: Empowerment

"I have learnt a form of engagement, commitment here. I believe that thanks to this I will not go astray. Many of the people I know around have gone astray because they don't have the support."
(Tariku, 17, PATH).

Empowerment is "a process of transition from a state of powerlessness to a state of relative control over one's life" (Sadan, 2004, p. 144). Conversely, disempowerment refers to the process of being denied opportunities, or rights, associated with the ability to participate, with reasonable independence, in society's activities.

Most young people interviewed, particularly teenagers, have developed a sense of self that has evolved from wandering souls to educationally and socially empowered children. These youth's testimonies show the fragility of children's rights, and shed light on one of the essential clauses stipulated in the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959): "the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth." The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) further acknowledges that, "in all countries in the world, there are children living in exceptionally difficult conditions, and that such children need special consideration." Most of the older students interviewed (14 and up) believe that, without the support of CH, they would have followed the unbearable, and, often unavoidable, path of child labour abuse, child prostitution, and of other forms of violations of their rights as children. Desta, 17, from PATH explains, "[t]hanks to the center, I have avoided drug addiction that would have happened due to peer pressure. I see my friends who don't have the chance to come to this centre and they struggle." Aron, 14, from Gullele contends, "I can tell you from the life of the children from my neighborhood. Most of them, even though they are kids, are victims of child labour abuse. I would have been like them." These children believe that CH's centers and schools have protected them from such fate by giving them a safe educational and social structure.

Perception of others in community and society: Social consciousness

“Attention needs to be given to girls who are raped.” (Mesfin, 14, Alemgena)

“[If I were in charge of this center,] I would not make a difference between girls and boys.

Because they are equal, I have to look equally.” (Maya, 9, BEKA).

Social consciousness refers to one’s awareness of the problems, strengths, and hardships of the society in which one lives. The experience of social inclusion has resulted, for many, in a commitment to, or at least a desire for, social action. “It is difficult for orphans in Ethiopia to be successful in education, but I want to work hard to become a doctor to help my grandmother and the people in my country” (Benaïm, 17, PATH). Although the terms “human rights” and “children’s rights” were never spoken per se, these children expressed a strong concern for social justice. When asked how they would proceed should they ever be in charge of a center such as the one they are currently enrolled in, the responses all revolved around protecting those who are most vulnerable. Interestingly, while some advocate for gender equity (girls need to be prioritized because there are greater challenges for girls than for boys), others advocate for human equality (we all deserve to be educated and to live free of abuse, regardless of gender). Specifically, while 14 year-old Mesfin expressed a concern for equity when he said, “I would choose girls first and the younger ones because they are the most vulnerable,” 9 year-old Maya articulates a concern for equality when she stated, “I would not make a difference between boys and girls; because they are equal, I have to look equally.”

Remaining difficulties and limitations faced by NGOs

“There are times when life is very difficult. The income is not enough for all of us. So life is hard.” (Orianna, 15, Alemgena)

Difficulties remain in the area of home and emotional attachment, scarcity of supplies, and health. In particular, the health and economic autonomy of the children’s guardians are often threatened by the fact that these guardians are generally old, and/or have led extremely difficult lives, leaving them vulnerable and in need of their own children’s support: “I help my grandmother at home every day after school... sometimes, she is too tired,” explains Adina, 12, from LiGA. Time to study is at risk of being replaced by child labour. While school drop-out has been reported to be low since enrolment in CH’s programs, the factors that might hinder these students’ ability to go on to university or vocational college, or find employment after completion of CH’s programs need to be understood to better address issues of sustainability and continuity, as they may arise. The emotional stability of the home remains a stressor for some of the children interviewed. As 16 year-old Johan from Gullele expresses, “I try to challenge my grandmother and my brother to show me love.” Death in the family, conflicts within the home, and depression affect the emotional balance of the child. Safety was also mentioned as a concern by some of the girls, a number of whom are well aware of the risks of physical violence associated with their gender.

These specific difficulties point to the broader limitations that CH faces, which are outside of its mandate. In particular, widespread poverty, shortage of, or access issues to, social services, and generally the socio-political climate of the country, are all external constraints that are likely to continue to impact the lives of these children and their families despite the commitment and capacity building of CH. In fact, research shows that, while NGOs are often more efficient than State agencies at providing services to communities in need, due to their size, their organizational structure, and the nature of

their relationships with the communities they serve, (Cornman, Grimm, & Rana, 2005), they also face real limitations due to external factors such as those mentioned above. As a result, NGOs often face the common criticism of limited scale impact (DeJong, 2003), thus pointing to issues of sustainability. Such criticism needs to be contextualized within “broader infrastructure problems inherent in many developing countries” (Cornman, Grimm, & Rana, 2005, p. 5). NGOs also face internal issues, particularly those of a management issue, namely relations between board members and staff (Aksel & Baran, 2006). Recommendations that have been identified to address these difficulties and increase capacity building include promoting enabling external environments through the development of effective partnerships with key stakeholders and government officials, purposeful self-evaluation and triangulation, applications for multi-year funding, (Cornman, Grimm, & Rana, 2005; Hailey & James, 2003), as well as internal management vigilance around decision-making process, training, and staff career development (Aksel and Baran, 2006).

Concluding remarks

It is evident, through the children’s eyes, that CH and its local NGOs have been instrumental in alleviating social exclusion, and enabling access to a quality education with a sense of belonging and attachment, an increased self-esteem, and new aspirations. The children have developed a sense of belonging to the centers and a belief in possibilities, thanks to an inclusive emotional support, a sense of equality with peers that increases their self-esteem, and a student-centered academic instruction that centers around each individual’s needs. While life has been extremely difficult for many, resilience prevails in such a way that education, above all things, is regarded as the life force that feeds one’s soul. A significant benefit of CH’s programs is the avoidance of the risks associated with social exclusion. Findings show that CH has provided opportunities for social inclusion by developing holistic programs that address the emotional, physical and mental needs of the child. However, to conclude that these children have found a way into stable social inclusion with its associated economic, employment, educational, and other social opportunities, one would have to establish evidence of long-term longevity of these benefits. The question of the extent to which the current benefits translate into long-term empowerment and social participation remains to be explored through a longitudinal study with students who have completed their program through CH.

This study also points to the need to further investigate education and poverty issues along the line of gender, namely with a specific focus on girls. While gender was beyond the focus of this particular study, gender appears to form, as suggested in a number of studies in Sub-Saharan Africa (Rose and Al-Samarrai, 2001; Camfield, 2011), an added layer of complexity and vulnerability for girls and young women.

Last but not least, there is much to learn from these testimonies, not only for the purpose those who work internationally in the field of education and development, but also for those who work *interculturally* within Canada, namely educators and teacher educators committed to social justice. The risks associated with social exclusion are found not only with orphaned and vulnerable children in Ethiopia, but also with youth in Canada who were rendered vulnerable because of economic, social and cultural issues, as well as oppressive political forces. As such, parallels may be drawn between the social exclusion that affects orphaned and vulnerable youth in Ethiopia and the social exclusion

that affects many of our minority students in Canada, including both immigrant and Aboriginal populations. Additionally, this study highlights the inherent link between risk and resilience (Fraser, 1997), two characteristics found in many students in Canadian schools, such as those students who come from war-affected countries, a segment of our immigrant population which has significantly increased over the last decade. When looking at educational success, schools may capitalize on vulnerable children's resilience by enabling and supporting aspirations, hope and the child's belief in a life project, and by doing so holistically (the child in all her dimensions, such as emotionally, mentally, physically, spiritually) and ecologically (the child within different social systems, such as family, school, community, society).

Acknowledgements: The author would like to thank the children who participated in this study for their time, sincerity, and generosity, when sharing their stories.

References

- Aksel, I., & Baran, M. (2006). Organizational problems of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, 21. Retrieved from <http://www.turkishweekly.net/article/159/organizational-problems-of-non-governmental-organizations-ngos-.html>
- Blackburn, D. (1999). NGOS: Allies in development education. *Green Teacher*, Winter, 57, 32-33.
- Bodgan, R. & Biklen, S. (2003). *Qualitative research for education*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Brofenbrenner, U. (Ed.). (2005). *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Camfield, L. (2011). 'A girl never finishes her journey': mixing methods to understand female experiences of education in contemporary Ethiopia. *Research Papers in Education* 26(4), 393-412.
- Canadian Humanitarian Organization for International Relief (2012). Retrieved from <http://www.canadianhumanitarian.com/index.php?p=moreinfo>
- Charlick, J. (2005). Accelerating Learning for Children in Developing Countries: Joining Research and Practice. C. J. Prather (ed.). Washington, DC: U.S. Agency for International Development. Developed by Creative Associates International, Inc. under the Basic Education and Policy Support (BEPS) Activity.
- Cornman, H., Grimm, C., & Rana, S. (2005). Engaging local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the response to HIV/AIDS. Pact, Inc. Washington, D.C.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Fraser, M. (1997). *Risk and resilience in childhood: An ecological perspective*. Washington DC: NASW Press.
- Jianxiu, G. (2006). The role of NGOs in the social welfare. *Canadian Social Science*, 2(4), 15-18.
- Hailey, J., & James, R. (2003). NGO capacity building: The challenge of impact assessment. Paper presented to the New Directions in Impact Assessment for Development Methods & Practice Conference. IDPM University of Manchester. November 2003. Retrieved from <http://portals.wi.wur.nl/files/docs/ppme/Hailey.pdf>
- Kanu, Y. (2008). Educational needs and barriers for African refugee students in Manitoba. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 31(4), 915-940.
- Meyer, C. (1996). NGOs and the environment: A rapidly expanding role. *Ecodecision*. Fall 1996, 37.
- Mfum-Mensah, O. (2003). Fostering educational participation in pastoral communities through non-formal education: the Ghanaian perspective, *International Journal of Educational Development*, 23(6), 661-677.
- Obanya, P. (2004). *Promoting basic education for women and girls, Four African case studies*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Office of the United Nations' High Commissioner for Human Rights. (1990). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Retrieved from <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>

- Rose, P., & Al-Samarrai, S. (2001). Household constraints on schooling by gender; Empirical evidence from Ethiopia. *Comparative Education Review*, 45(1), 36-63.
- Rose, P. M. (2007). *NGO Provision of Basic Education: Alternative or Complementary Service Delivery to Support Access to the Excluded?* Project Report, Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE), Falmer, UK.
- Saint-Martin, Jean-Guy (1994). Increasing Ngo influence on development policy. *Peace Research*, 26(1), 79.
- Sadan, E. (2004). Empowerment and community planning. Ebook. Available from http://www.mpow.org/elisheva_sadan_empowerment.pdf
- Silver, H. (2007). Social exclusion. Comparative analysis of Europe and Middle East Youth. Middle East Youth Initiative Working Paper. 1(4), 5-48.
- Sudarkasa, N. (1982). Sex roles, education, and development in Africa. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 13(3), 279-289.
- Torres, R. (2001) Amplifying and diversifying learning: Formal, non-formal and informal education revisited. ADEA. Available from <http://www.adeanet.org/adeaPortal/adea/wgnfe/publications/biennial01/RMTorres%20%20ADEA%20Biennale%20outline.pdf>
- United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (2007). Steady increase in street children orphaned by AIDS. Retrieved from http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/ethiopia_30783.html
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Nathalie Piquemal is an Associate-Professor in the Faculty of Education, at the University of Manitoba. Her research focuses on international and intercultural issues in education, with special attention to issues to social justice, education and development, as well as human rights.