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Preface

Research on identity in the early years has widened the 'lens' used to frame children's subjectivities as capable and competent beings. Despite this, much of the literature on children from underprivileged contexts has continued to position children as 'tragic' or 'needy'. For example, research on children living on the street in India continues to be imbued by language caricaturising children as 'vulnerable', 'criminal', 'troublesome' or 'violent'. Concurrently, literature suggests that labels such as "street child" have been used to classify, rank, measure, exclude and/or segregate children in early childhood and educational programs. Thus, critics have argued that constructions of the "street child" have made children's identities synonymous with their experiences of street life, thereby disregarding the view that vulnerability is a situational experience, rather than an inherent trait. Reflecting on the question of 'if a focus on identity may be as problematic as it is useful', this chapter is underscored by three aims. First, it aims to disrupt the adult 'gaze' of the "street child", drawing on insights from research eliciting children's perspectives. Secondly, the chapter unpacks the views of children living on the street about their identity and experiences as "street children". Finally, the chapter draws on insights from critical pedagogy to problematise oppression and offer alternatives for engaging children in the processes of identity resistance, reinvention and reclamation, through reflection on the pedagogical possibilities emerging from engaging children in the development of critical consciousness.

Troublemakers
by Leelee Baranovski[i]

We are not the mistakes that we make.
We are not the shadows of our worst self-doubts,
We are not our shame,
We are not our humiliations,
We are not our pain,
We are not the ghosts of who we have been,
Or might have been.
We are not the labels they give us.
We are not the stories that others tell about our lives.
We don't want your pity. Your sneers. Your blame. Your gaze. Your sighs.
Yes, we are flawed.
But that is what it *means* to be human.
Who can truly say:
That they have faced uncertainty without regret?
Does it make us inferior if we admit:
That there are many days we wish
Our lives would give us back –
But for all that could be,
For all that is,
We are no less proud,
And no less desirous of being,
All of whom we might yet be.

Dear Reader

To start with, I'll tell you a story about three young children walking home from preschool. Though the premise for such a story seems simple enough – as you read through it, I'd like you to consider how this story speaks to issues of social class, identity, cultural capital, discrimination and stereotyping – concepts which we will return to throughout this chapter.

The Story

I was working as a volunteer-teacher and researcher at the centre for children living on the street in Mumbai, India. Every morning I walked through the streets and across a bridge alongside several hundred other people to get to the centre. After many conversations with different families, I organised to visit one of the families at their home on the street. The plan was for me to walk with three children – Birbal (male, 7), Payal (female, 5) and Sonakshi (female, 4) – to meet their mother at home.

The day began and ended the same as any other. When it was done, I walked behind the children across that same bridge I walked over every single day. Only this time, a man in a military uniform came up to us and said in a sharp and unmistakeably authoritative tone: "Excuse me ma'am." Before those three short words even escaped his lips, the children bolted – running as fast as they could across the bridge and down to the other side. The man in the military uniform barely turned around to register their disappearance. His body blocked my path and he said, in English, "What are you doing with those children?"

With a growing sense of discomfort, I began to launch into an explanation to which he replied, "Do you work for an NGO?" I explained I did and proceeded to divulge more information about who I was, what I was doing in India, and with the children. I could see his face registering my Australian accent and my Indian clothes as he listened to what I had to say with a stern face. After a short interrogation, he took a step back, and said with a nod, "Okay, fine, thank you; you're free to go" and briskly turned and walked away.

When I made my way across the bridge and down the stairs, Birbal, Payal and Sonakshi were waiting for me at a distance. They did not ask about the encounter, instead, pointed enthusiastically at their home and its surrounds. When I sat to have a chai and a chat with their mother later, I recounted the encounter. Birbal shifted his body slightly to hear the conversation. "We ran", he told his mother. "That's good", she said, "but have you seen him before?" she asked, and then added for my benefit, "Birbal makes friends with all the people, so he knows them and calls them all 'uncle', so he keeps on their good side because he's smart like that and then they give him advice about how to stay out of trouble". Birbal shrugged wordlessly. Payal added, "We didn't see him before because he was from the *army* not the police". Birbal stood up and came closer to his mother, "Yes, and was alone so he must've been off duty and I didn't see his gun, did you see? Did he have one?" he asked me. I replied he did not. Birbal began to pretend play with a gun, running over to "shoot" Payal and Sonakshi. "Did he have a baton?" he asked. I replied that I had not seen one. "I have a baton" he said, transforming his arm and running across to hit Sonakshi. "What's the difference between the army and the police?" I asked. "One is the army and one is police" replied Birbal dryly. "One's good and one's bad" added Payal. "No, but police can also be good… and both also can be bad… to us" said Birbal.

He looked up at me and noted, "A good army man wouldn't be bad to you maybe?" After a short pause he added, "That's what I will be when I grow up." His mother joked "Good or bad?" using his hand once more as a baton, he ran across the pavement to hit Payal. "Police, police, police" he teased. Payal began to cry loudly. Looking up from the stove, their mother intervened, "Both of you, stop making trouble!"

Seeing a "Street Child"

Why do you think the man in the uniform stopped me? Was he originally trying to stop the children? What assumptions and judgements were made as he rationalised his decision? What role might things like social class, identity, cultural capital, stereotypes and stigma play in this? Who was he trying to 'serve or protect' in this situation? Who did he see as the troublemaker/s? I do not know what went through this man's mind nor do I have any concrete way of finding out. It was clear this man knew these children lived on the streets or at least, knew they belonged to another marginalised group. This was evidenced by his question, "Do you work for an NGO?" which emerged almost immediately in our conversation. If the officer recognised the children as children who lived on the street, how did the construct of a "street child" inform his thinking and decision-making? What implicit connotations regarding "street children" did he make? Did he see them as vulnerable? Criminal? Poor? Cunning? Resourceful? Tragic? Violent? Smart? Where did his understandings come from?

This is an opportune moment to reflect on where our own understandings and ideas about "street children" might come from. Consider the following questions:

1. Who do you understand is a "street child"?

2. What comes to mind when you think of "street children"? Where do these ideas come

from? What underlying assumptions might be informing your understandings?

Who are "Street Children"?

Researchers often categorise "street children" in three ways – (i) children "of" the street,

(ii) children "on" the street, and (iii) children who belong to families who live together on the

street (UNICEF, 2012). To clarify: children "of" the street are children who live on the streets.

Conversely, children "on" the streets are children who work on the streets but return home

regularly. Lastly, children from street families are those who live and may work with their

families on the streets (Aptekar & Stoecklin, 2014). The story above involves children who

belong to the third (iii) category.

Thomas de Benítes (2011) in her extensive review of international literature on children

living on the streets, highlights the diverse social constructions of children as: criminal,

vulnerable, troublesome, violent or invisible. She suggests that certain constructions of children

in policy documents and development work might serve underlying economic or political

agendas (for example, raising money or child protection) (Thomas de Benítes, 2011). Examining

these views however, Thomas de Benítes (2011) offers insights as to why stereotypical

understandings of children living on the street might be problematic, noting:

Street children perceived as delinquents are more likely to be feared, excluded and

subjected to random and state-led violence and are more likely to end up in the penal

system… Street children perceived as victims are more likely to be treated as passive

objects of welfare… Children whose characteristics fall outside the 'street child'

stereotype may become invisible to policy-makers, service-providers, the media and

public (Thomas de Benítes, 2011, p. 12).

Aptekar (2014) suggests that such constructions of children living on the street are

problematic because they make children's identities synonymous with their experiences of street

life. In doing so, these views disregard the consideration that children themselves are not

inherently vulnerable – or that barriers to equity, justice, participation and inclusion faced by

children – are not barriers that are *within* children but are rather *experienced* by children living in

unfair and unequal worlds. Accordingly, whilst the term "street children" is commonly used in

the literature, from this point on, I use "children living on the streets" to refer to this group. This

reframing of language reflects the intention to see and recognise the full personhood of a child.

Person-first language (Cologon, 2014) is used throughout this chapter to recognise that living on

the streets with their families is just one part of these children's lives, and is not the defining

feature of who they are.

This shift in language also reflects the need to problematise inherently deficit social

constructions of children (Aptekar, 1994; Aptekar & Stoecklin, 2014), and to challenge the adult

gaze used to characterise children (Beazley, 2003). Drawing on research conducted with children

living on the streets in Indonesia, Beazley (2003) highlights how the perspectives of children

differ from dominant public discourses. She notes that children:

> reject their 'victim' or 'deviant' label… Instead of complaining about their lives (which is
>
> considered bad form), they reinforce the things that they feel are good about living on the
>
> street… Problems are often glossed over and treated with humour and a light-hearted

disregard… children and youth learn to interact and comply with the expectations of their own group, and are more influenced by it. It is in this way that the Tikyan community enables a street child to establish a new identity, and is a means through which street children can voice their collective indignation at the way they are treated by mainstream society (Beazley, 2003, p. 1).

Disrupting the Adult Gaze

As Beazley's (2003) research highlights, there is a need to "truly listen" to children and to challenge the ways the adults 'superimpose' identities on children, and 'silence' children's constructions of the self. Whilst advocating the importance of reconceptualising children as social and political subjects with rights rather than 'tragic' beings, Thomas de Benítes (2011) cautions a "full focus on child rights risks missing individual children's mix of experiences and needs through universal or broad-based policy-making" (p. 10). Bearing these points and counter-points in mind, there is a need to recognise the multiplicity of 'identities' and the ways in which children might "perform" their identities (Raburu, 2015). For example, Birbal's performance of being a police officer which involved hitting his sister with a "baton", might be indicative of his knowledge of the inequitable and hierarchical nature of power relations between people in positions of authority and children living on the streets.

Conversely, Birbal's perception that "a good army man" would not "be bad" to me, similarly hints at his knowledge of how multiple identities (for example, legal, cultural, social and personal) (Harbitz & del Carmen Tamargo, 2009; Raburu, 2015) play out in small cultural interactions. That is, for example, Birbal's suggestion implied that my being an English-

speaking, adult, female foreigner afforded me certain privileges that he does not have. Thus, Birbal expressed subtly how both of us experienced our identities in ways that reflected our social, racial, caste, gendered and classed positions in society. This is similarly reflected in the way all three children ran as soon as I was stopped, suggesting their awareness of the personal and structural discrimination they are likely to face by persons in uniform (Kombarakaran, 2004). Research showing the historical, cultural, social and political nature of discrimination experienced by children living on the street is well documented (Ganesan & Gossman, 1996; Kombarakaran, 2004; Tata Institute of Social Sciences & Action Aid India, 2013).

Despite evidence showing how children living on the street experience structural discrimination, cultural barriers and stigma, research also shows how children themselves are positioned as "troublemakers" (Singh & Purohit, 2011). This is similar to research from other contexts, which shows how children are positioned as "problematic" when they do not conform to adult expectations of obedience and compliance (Graham, 2008; Honkasilta, Vehkakoski, & Vehmas, 2016). This view of children being the problem was also evident when Birbal's mother reflected on how he received advice from local officers on "how to stay out of trouble" whilst living on the street, implying it is children rather than their treatment by society, which is problematic. Whilst this example could show how a mother supports her son to live in an unfair world, as hooks argues, such practices encourage children to internalise and naturalise unjust and inequitable ways of thinking, being and doing, by reaffirming the understanding that "assimilation is the way to gain acceptance and approval from those in power" (hooks, 1989, p. 80). The internalising of these ideas is potentially evident in Birbal's aspirations to be a police officer when he grows up. Whilst Birbal notes that police officers can be "good and bad… to us"

he also performs the identity of a police officer through physical violence by hurting his sister with a pretend baton. Why might this line of thinking be important for educators to challenge? As Freire (1970) notes, individuals experiencing oppression are taught to internalise their own dehumanisation as well as that of others; this results in a process where individuals themselves become oppressors. Freire (1970, p. 27) explains:

> The oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or 'sub-oppressors.' The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity.

> Within such frames of reality,

- what do you think the purpose of education is for children who live on the street;

- can – or should – early childhood educators in such contexts focus *only* on teaching children "technical" skills (such as reading and writing) (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005);

- is our role to teach learners to socialise to existing status quos and dominant discourses (Biesta, 2015)? Or to act as *troublemakers* who challenge, disrupt and question the ways in which education systems reproduce inequalities and injustices (Giroux, 2011);

- what might it mean to engage children in ethical, political, critical and liberatory (anti-oppressive) education (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Freire, 1998, 2005); and what might this look like and involve?

To engage with these questions, the following section of this chapter, draws on the theory of critical pedagogy to explore possibilities for thinking through viable social alternatives for

engaging with processes of identity resistance, reinvention and reclamation, and the development of critical consciousness.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is a socio-political theory of education that focuses on education as a practice and mechanism for democracy, emancipation, justice and equity (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003). It involves educators considering the ways in which oppression is reflected, recycled or resisted through educational ideologies, structures, pedagogies and practices (Giroux, 2018). Critical pedagogy concentrates on challenging technical rationalities and so-called "neutral" or "objective" practices that perpetuate the status quo (Giroux, 2018). It is a theory for educational praxis (reflection and action in practice) (Freire, 1970) which seeks to transform inequitable relations in society particularly through educational spaces and endeavours (McLaren, 2003). While others have provided exhaustive overviews of the characteristics of critical pedagogy (Darder, Mayo, & Paraskeva, 2015; Giroux, 2018), three key concepts will be unpacked here: that education is political, critical consciousness, and 'the banking concept' of education.

Education is Political

The notion that 'education is political' refers to the understanding that education is not and cannot be neutral. That is, "objective" knowledge and "truths" taught in school, both overtly and covertly, emerge from particular socio-historical origins and privilege certain groups and cultural forms of knowledge over others (Au, 2013; Giroux, 2011). As Freire (1970) argues, if

we seek to hold on to the comfort that education is not political, we are simply showing affinity

to existing structures of injustice and inequity.

Critical educators have been admonished for suggesting that education is political (Han,

2013), often being advised or ordered to "leave politics out of the classroom" (Sondel, Baggett,

& Dunn, 2018, p. 183). As Giroux (2001) contends, however, it is not possible for educators (or

children) to leave politics outside of the classroom because all of us exist as "political animals"

in social worlds (Kincheloe, 2004). Putting on a school uniform does not change children's lived

experiences of their street identities. Injustice, inequity, oppression are not things that exist "out

there" in the real world rather than within educational spaces. Rather, the opposite is true; the

inequities and injustices experienced by children in "the real world" are perpetuated within

educational spaces (Mallett, 2016). Thus, critical educators advocate the importance of

supporting children's development of critical consciousness.

Critical Consciousness

As Kincheloe (2008, p. 13) exerted, "critical consciousness involves the development of

new forms of understanding that connect us more directly to understanding, empathizing with,

and acting to alleviate suffering. Sophisticated understandings and engagement in the struggle

against inequality characterize a critical consciousness." Therefore, engaging in the development

of critical consciousness with children such as Birbal, Payal and Sonakshi, would provide a

platform for understanding the political nature of their position and status in society. As critical

writers note, supporting the development of critical consciousness is teaching learners that to

"die from hunger is a social anomaly... not a biological issue. It is a crime that is practiced by the

capitalist economy… [which is] a social production that is amoral and diabolical and should be considered a crime against humanity" (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 390).

Freire (1973) suggests that educators could engage learners in the development of critical consciousness in order to problematise the ways in which "particular ideas come to dominate our understandings of and actions in the social world and contribute to the inequities in it" (Mac Naughton, 2005, p. 8). For example, particular understandings of children living on the street as being 'tragic, violent, delinquent or problematic' further perpetuate the exclusion, structural discrimination and surveillance experienced by this group (Mac Naughton, 2005). Freire (2000) contends that developing critical consciousness is not enough to bring about changes, rather, critical consciousness equips learners with the tools they need to "recognise and confront injustice and to resist oppressive ways of becoming" (Mac Naughton, 2003, p. 183). In addition to engaging children in developing critical consciousness, critical educators highlight the need for broader systemic change. Thus, they raise an awareness of the need to challenge and revolutionise "banking" approaches to education (McLaren, 2003).

'Banking Approaches' to Education

Freire (1970) defines the banking approach as one in which "the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat" (p. 53). The banking approach continues to be critiqued by thinkers who highlight how such systems perpetuate the dehumanization, massification and domestification of the oppressed (Freire, 1970). Banking approaches to education work to "numb" or "anesthetize" learners by teaching technical skills (such as reading and writing) whilst silencing ethical and political practices (such

as awareness of injustices). In turn, banking approaches perpetuate uncritical acceptance of the

status quo (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2001; Kincheloe, 2008).

As Freire (1970) argues, the fundamental problem with education systems is the

contradictory contention that children need to learn to adapt to, rather than transform, social rules

and norms that marginalise, silence and exclude learners. What is needed instead, is for educators

to "see the school not simply as an area of indoctrination or socialization or a site of instruction,

but also as a cultural terrain that promotes student empowerment and self-transformation"

(McLaren, 2003, p. 70). It is only when understanding that educational sites act for both

reproduction *and* resistance, that actors can begin to "gnaw" at education systems to bring about

change from the inside-out (Horton & Freire, 1990).

Troublemakers: Resisting, reclaiming and reinventing identities

Drawing on insights from critical pedagogy, it could be argued that bringing about

change involves a two-fold process. First, to begin to challenge dominant discourses, educators

can engage with children and families in educational spaces "with political intent" (Smith, as

cited in Mac Naughton, 2005, p. 19). This process involves understanding exactly *how* education

is political, and requires consideration of questions such as: What content is taught in educational

settings? Who decides what content is reflected in curriculum documents? What and who

informs us about the "gold standard" or "best practice" in our sector? How are public and private

educational settings funded and resourced? Whose cultural knowledge is reflected in

standardised tests and whose interests does this serve? (Giroux, 2018; Mac Naughton, 2005). For

example, any attempt to engage Birbal, Payal and Sonakshi in "neutral" education would be akin

to teaching children content divorced from their reality by using "official language, school rules, classroom social relations" (Giroux, 2001, p. 66) that privilege certain forms of cultural knowledge and capital to the exclusion of others. This would silence the experiences of these children's lives by claiming that learning about oppression (for example racism, classism, ableism, sexism, discrimination or injustice) which children face is not "age appropriate" or "relevant" content (Giroux, 2014). Therefore, the question arises: how might we move beyond these discourses and practices?

Beyond "knowing" how educational sites might be perpetuating oppression, there is scope for educators to change the ways in which systems operate. One possible step for actualising change might be for educators to engage *alongside* children as troublemakers to actively dis-establish the oppression experienced by children and families in street situations. Engaging in such troublemaking might involve showing children viable identity alternatives or oppositional worldviews which foster transformative resistance (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). For example, questioning Birbal about what growing up to be a police officer means to him, before further offering provocations for considering what "good and bad" might mean when thinking about the role, position and purpose of people in positions of authority. Conversely, offering children counter-stories to reaffirm the existence of other ways of being critical and resistant citizens, could also offer opportunities for children to consider how they might re-draw or re-perform their identities as "powerful, resistant and proud" citizens who live on the streets. Offering provocations to develop children's critical consciousness could involve supporting children to consider: what identities they perform, what identities they feel they are "expected"

to perform and, how alternative possibilities for transgressing dominant "expectations" of who children are might emerge.

A fundamental feature of working in solidarity with children is the need to truly listen to children's thoughts and perspectives (MacNaughton, 2005). Additionally, supporting children to be involved with broader ethical and political praxis could engender generative possibilities for bringing about systemic change to address the multiple layers of race, caste, class, gender, disability and other forms of structural oppression experienced by children in local and global contexts (Adams, Brigham, Whitlock, & Johnson, 2009). In addition to engaging children as social actors, educators could reflect on their own position and praxis, by intentionally engaging with political questions such as:

- **How can we** teach children and young people not to hate, dehumanise and discriminate when disciplinary practices inside educational settings disproportionately impact "the impoverished, those of colour, maltreatment victims, students with… [disability], and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender" learners (Mallett, 2016, p. 15)?

- **How can we** teach learners to be inclusive whilst the system segregates on the basis of ability and/or impairment/disability and other labels?

- **How can we** teach learners to treat others as equals whilst (increasingly privatised) education systems (re)produce ideas of who is "desirable" and "undesirable" on the basis of money and [political] power? (Mevawalla, 2016, para 4).

Final Reflections

In moving forward there are many emerging reflections relevant for educators and practitioners to consider in seeking to work alongside children who experience marginalisation, discrimination or oppression. Fundamentally, whilst there can be no singular answer to address the "**how can we**" questions asked above, some possibilities for *engaging with* the "how can we" questions may offer signposts for practice. Educators might:

- involve families and children in challenging norms, assumptions and internalised constructions of who they think they are, can be, and/or become (Cologon & Thomas, 2014).

- engage children and community members together to begin the process of actively dis-establishing the discrimination and oppression faced by people living on the street and other marginalised groups.

- question what they believe is the purpose of education, engaging with theoretical tools such as critical pedagogy to problematise the perceived "irrelevance" and "developmental inappropriateness" of education for social justice in the early years.

- challenge the exclusion, marginalisation, silencing, surveillance and policing of diverse groups within the contexts of their own educational settings.

- consider the ways in which it is possible to act as troublemakers *with* children or to enable children to engage with "transformative troublemaking" which disrupts and challenges inequities and injustices and repositions children as proud, strong, and powerful protagonists in our communities and in the world.

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