Using Methodologies that Enable a *Stop* in Researching Children's Experience

Elizabeth Ngutuku
International Institute of Social Studies
Ngutuku@iss.nl

The experience of child poverty and vulnerability is complex, contingent and messy and understanding such an experience requires using methods and methodology that captures such messiness. I illustrate this by drawing on my ethnographic research on the lived experience of child poverty and vulnerability in Siaya Kenya.

Appropriating Appebaulm's(1995) metaphor of *a stop*, for a blind man, I demonstrate how I conceptualized the experience of children as a rhizome, a metaphor for complexity and how I used diverse child centred rhizomatic like creative drawing, diaries, photo narratives and autobiographical essays and listening to sub-texts in accessing children's experience. These methods were not meant to triangulate the findings but to enable a perspective on complexity, but also enable me to *stop* and think about the reality differently. Argues that (Eldén 2013:70)argued that lived experience need to be captured in ways that allow 'messiness' and multidimensionality to enter into research practice. This is, contrasted to triangulation, seen as a method of validating data or obtaining a more 'truer' or authentic' picture of the issue under study. Law (2004:2) adds voice to this argues that simple clear descriptions don't work if what they are describing is not itself very coherent and an endeavor to be clear increases the mess.

In this paper, I provide diverse illustrations of how these methods and approach, enabled me to *stop* and perceive the reality of children from a different perspective but also to gain diverse insights on children's experience. Law (2004:10) drawing on Appelbaum 1995, contrasts a stop with the quickness of seeing for a person with vision, because groping enables a blind man to move tentatively or what he calls, enabling a "poised perception", where one can engage with novelty. Fels (2009), argued that a stop, occurs when one encounters an obstacle and momentarily pauses. A stop points to issues that may be hidden and questions the taken for granted and our practices. I use the metaphor of a stop as a window into different perspectives.

It involved, conceptualizing children's experience as a complexity, re-thinking methods and methodology, re-thinking research rigor, ethics, voice of children, role of the researcher in data collection but also in the phenomenon under investigation among others. I provide diverse examples on how this was demonstrated through my research.

1. A stop as seeing the lived experience of children differently: The experience is not linear and so it cannot be captured using methods that are linear. I conceptualized it as a rhizome and an assemblage where different perspectives map into each other in nonlinear ways.
2. Methods beyond triangulation: Methods as emerging and methods as a stop

- Observations
- Diaries
- Essay writing
- Go-along interviews
- Photo-narratives
- Focus group discussions
- Accessing local gossip and rumors and discussions of the village, "being there"

Such methods enabled me to get the nuances and complexities of lived experience. From a methodological perspective, I mapped the data across different data sources and read it as a map. Martin and Kamberelis (2013:676) argues that "mapping affords opportunities to read data as complex, connected networks rather than as sets of discrete relations between and among variables". For example, children in the initial interviews did not present themselves as orphaned but many of them said they stay with their mother. By using diverse methods, I learned that the

concept of a mother in the Luo cultural universe may mean an aunt or an uncles wife, or an 'other mother' who has fostered the children. I also learned that 'staying with mother' also meant that some children were not getting any support from their fathers and so they said they stay with mother.

Methods enabled me to listen differently: Subtexts as methodology- Body language, humor, laughter, tears, glib comments, jokes as data etc. All these enabled me to listen but also responded to the subtexts in children and caregiver's accounts. Subtexts and my response helped me to surface issues that might have been ignored if I was too focused on the script. Reading the data through each other also enabled me to get nuances on children who may be invisible when using linear methods of data collection, e.g non-children, children labelled illegitimate, among others.

Nuanced methods also enabled the emergence of latent perspectives. For example, in focus group discussions I listened to the subtexts as well as the body language of children to bring out issues that they may seems latent in normal focus group discussions. E.g boy who had a torn uniform, was withdrawn and through talking to him, was able to obtain the nuances of programme support that was not meeting the needs if these children adequately.

3. Methods enabled sharing Sharing Pain without Breaking down

Through dairies and Essays, children were able to share their pain of watching their parents die, express the mundane of moving from one relative to another, sleeping without food, explain how their stomachs were rumbling, the experience of being a fostered child and sometimes the pain that accompanies that among others. For example, one child through an essay explained the horror of living in a bad house, beyond observation, the way it rained the whole night, how the roof caved in, how the beddings were soaked, how he felt like he was dying, how his grandmother picked him up late into the night. This was different from observing or stating that their house was of poor quality through interviews or through direct observation. It enabled me to reflect on, "What does a bad house do to children?".

4. Rethinking Ethics and My Role as a Researcher: Researching as an Angel

The messy experience of children's experience meant that ethics were entangled with the experience of children as well as the research and as part of data. This is contrary to other methodologies where ethics may seem are detached. For example, in re-thinking ethics, it meant stopping to become aware of who I was as I researched, a part of the assemblage of child poverty and vulnerability experience. Law(2004:3) noted that "we will need to think hard about our relations with whatever it is we know and ask how far the process of knowing it also brings it into being". Supports Barads(2007) perspective of reality as an entanglement.

In seeing the messy experience of poverty and vulnerability as a cartography, the methods enabled me to re- think the notions of stepping out of the research and locating myself as part of the assemblage. For example, children in their essays appealed to me or to others out there for support, my presence was therefore implicated in their experience. This also enabled me to re-think the role of raised expectations and see the art of expecting help as part of their messy experience. For example, in some cases, my presence also signaled hope and, in some cases, saw me as an 'Angel' as the following reveal "When I saw you I saw my God", "you are the daughter I never had", "God sent you to us". Beyond being reflexive on my potential role as an 'angel', it enabled me to interrogate the role of the state and other programmes in these sensibilities by caregivers and children.

5. Methodology and methods enabled me to Stop to think about Agency Differently:

I utilized a methodological dialogue in reading children's agency by reading their actions through different data and analyzing through Deleuzean ideas of taking lines of flight and politics that deterritorialize the dominant scripts (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). These politics, engage or stutter

the linear perspectives on children's experience. I also read these through ISin's (2012) acts of citizenship, seen as "how [children] constitute themselves as political subjects by the things they do," and how they break from habitus (Isin 2012:110).

Agency is beyond "power to" and it emerged as complex and messy. Agency is not what we give to children, it is also what we observe and what we see(Smith abd Greene 2015). It is their day to day politics as they engage with poverty and vulnerability. For example, young children demonstrated a perspective on a sense of rights (claiming these rights, rights as lived and as claimed) by pointing to a range of actors in their narratives o vulnerability. Children also demonstrated an awareness of sense of justice that I had not earlier imagined e.g by noting "one day we shall all be equal, or children questioning the strategies used by donor organizations that they saw as discriminatory.

Agency by children t was also emergent, a contextual, and contradictory. Children were able to enact specific agency in different contexts, even different contexts of data collection, sometimes based on the way they perceived my role as a researcher.

6. Reality as incomplete........ Methods as Slow and Sometimes Risky

Research into the messy experience of child poverty and vulnerability and the methods are slow, and reality keeps on emerging and is fleeting. The experience of children was also conceptually messy. For example, I did not even know where to start, I told the children to tell me about themselves and their experience but did not want to say experience of poverty and vulnerability because I did not want to frame them as poor. It was also demonstrated when some children started by explaining their experience as a metaphor, "we are just like this".

The non-linear nature of their experience was sometimes demonstrated when they started their essays with accounts way before they were born and depicted their experience as an imagination of good life their parents had when they were born. It was also demonstrated when some children noted when I instructed them to work on their essays that they did not where to start.

Researching the unpredictable experience also involved tentatively approaching the field like a rhizome and engaging in several encounters with children and the caregivers. Issues under investigation emerged as the research unfolded and I was guided by nuances from different encounters. Children's experience emerged as a moving target but also a target that changed shape in different ways, also disappeared and sometimes came back in another form (Law 2004).

Using these methods may take long, might be costly (in diverse sense), but it challenges the ideas that we can see reality from one perspective.

7. Implications for a *stop* and Messy on for Clarity and Rigour?

I borrow from Law (2004:3) who says "Perhaps we will need to rethink our ideas
about clarity and rigor and find ways of knowing the indistinct and the slippery without trying to grasp and hold them tight known in social science". I note that the experience of children with child poverty and vulnerability is a messy and ephemeral, unpredictable and is best understood by using methods and approaches that attuned to capturing such intricacies.

References
Barad, K. (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning.* Duke University Press.
Eldén, S. (2013) 'Inviting the Messy: Drawing Methods and 'children's Voices", *Childhood* 20(1): 66-81.
Fels, L. (2009). Mind the Gap: Outrageous Acts of Political Solidarity *Educational Insights, 13*(3
Law, J, (2004) *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research.* London: Routledge.
Martin, A.D., Kamberelis, G., (2013) 'Mapping Not Tracing: Qualitative Educational Research with Political Teeth', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 26(6): 668-679
Smith, Carmel., Greene, Sheila, (2015) Annie Rogiers: *In Key Thinkers in Childhood Studies (Pp. 199-208).* Bristol: Policy Press at the University of Bristol. Bristol: Policy Press.