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**¿POR QUÉ NO CAMBIAS? RELATO DE LOS PADRES Y DE LOS EDUCADORES DE CALLE ACERCA DE LAS MUCHACHAS QUE INGRESAN A LA VIDA EN CALLE Y SALEN DE ELLA EN BOLIVIA. ACEPTADO PARA LA PUBLICACIÓN EN CHILDREN'S GEOGRAPHIES.***

La Paz - Bolivia

**Why can't you change? Stories of parents and street educators about young girls entering and leaving street life in Bolivia (accepted in: Children's Geographies)**

For children and young people in street situations, to give up street life is easier said than done. This study aims to contribute to the field of children and young people in street situations by introducing the voices of parents whose daughters live on the streets. In biographical-narrative interviews, we asked parents together with street educators from Bolivia to share their stories of girls entering and leaving street life. Our findings showed that the child's act of running away made parents aware about their parenting, leading to new openings and possible renewed social bonds with their children. At the same time, street educators' stories exposed the importance of the family support during the process of exiting street life. Nevertheless, even though parents no longer want to stand on the side-lines, the stories also revealed that parents are still forgotten throughout interventions in Bolivia.

## 1. Introduction

As literature has shown, acquiring a stable lifestyle is the long-term goal of organisations working for children and young people in street situations[1] worldwide (Berckmans, Velasco, Tapia, and Loots, 2012). But giving up street life is easier said than done. Conticini (2005) for example noticed the failure of programmes to sustainably engage children in street situations in their activities in Bangladesh. Organisations continue to maintain certain services without acknowledging children's capacities to obtain many needs by themselves (Conticini, 2005). In Mexico and Brazil authors observed children's preferences for street life overlosing independence in shelters (Santana, Doninelli, Frosi, and Koller, 2005; Turnbull, Hernández and Reyes, 2009). A study from Bolivia showed the importance attached to belonging to a street group, which for children, is considered to be their family, in sharp contrast to the feelings of rejection and discrimination that impedes children to be part of society (Velasco, Berckmans, O'Driscoll, Loots, & Tapia Pinto, in press).

Influenced by the 'New Social Studies of Childhood', research on street children has greatly recognized children's competencies, lives and voices. Giving a voice to children broadened the field by detailing children's resourcefulness and demonstrating their ability to influence their lives (Mayall, 2001). It marked a shift with previous research that regarded street children as passive victims and as irretrievably damaged (Thomas de Benítez, 2011). Reports exposed how children master their surroundings when they are on the streets (Jones & Thomas de Benítez, 2009), and how street life offers new complex social networks (Evans, 2005) and a sense of personal and social identity (van Blerk, 2005). At the same time, children and young people in street situation face physical and sexual violence, health problems, substance abuse and death far more often than their home-based peers (OCHR, 2011). Consequently protecting children from these adversities by getting them out of the streets seems pressing. It is within this complex intersection of

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[1]We and the street-based organisations in Bolivia us the term 'children and young people in street situations', as 'street children' has a static connotation. The experiences of these children in the city of El Alto, Bolivia, are more fluid. They move between home, streets, friends' homes and institutions (van Blerk, 2012).

vulnerability and children's agency that organisations face challenges in working with children and young people in street situations.

Furthermore, this resourcefulness tends to position children in street situations as being isolated and alone, disconnected from their family and community (van Blerk, 2012). Consequently, academic work on street children has hitherto more often taken place on the micro-scale, focusing on aspects of street life and rarely exploring the everyday lives, as part of not only the streets but also families, communities and wider societal networks (Thomas de Benítez, 2011; van Blerk, 2012). Exploring children's and young people's lives from a relational perspective will advance theory on how children's and young people's experiences are framed by social contexts; to explore for example how their experiences with taking part in interventions aimed at helping them leaving street life (quitting drug addiction, theft, violence) is embedded in and also how they negotiate with their social relationships and their wider social context. Ennew (2003) therefore proposes to engage all actors involved with children in street situations in research, as this will help us to "begin to see children as a social group operating in relation to the social order, to understand local activities and interactions in relation to large scale forces" (Mayall, 2001).

The importance of working with the wider networks of children in street situations is further highlighted in the following studies. Despite a widely held view of a break between the family and the child as the cause of children being on the street, most street children are in regular contact with their families (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2011. Thomas de Benítez, 2011). Arnold and Rotheram-Borus (2009) showed that positive relationships with educators, family, peers and significant others provided the motivation for children in street situations to resist risky behaviour patterns. The study of Mathiti (2006) indicated that children who had the opportunity to have family visits in rehabilitation centres, obtained feelings of reintegration. And finally, studies from developed countries on homeless youth claimed that family members, who were once the reason for leaving home, can also hold an enabling role to exit street life (Mayok, Corr and O'Sullivan, 2011). However, as family members are still seen as part of the problem and seldom as part of the solution (Conticini and Hulme, 2006), a reluctance to involve parents in programmes prevails (Schwinger, 2007) and even more disturbing, their voices in research are silenced (Rafaelli, 2012). Until now, we found only one peer-reviewed article (van Blerk, 2012) that included family member's voices.

This study aims to contribute to the field of children and young people in street situations by involving parents. By asking parents, from El Alto, Bolivia, to narrate their lives with their children (in street situations), we reframe the stories of entering and leaving the streets as stories connected to not only the child, but also to other significant actors and the wider social context. Furthermore, street educators were also asked to narrate their life stories of working with children and young people in street situations. Considering both adult groups share the hope for children and young people to exit street life, but seldom meet each other, we found it a challenging idea to place the work life stories and parental life stories side by side. How do closely involved actors narrate about their children's experiences of going from home life to street life and back?

1. **Methodology**

### 1.1. Study design

This study draws from a broader ethnographic field research on the experiences of children and young people in street situations, of their parents and of street educators. The ethnographic research was realised in the light of gaining insight into street life with the aim to later on carry out participatory action research with each participant group. The ethnographic research was conducted between March 2011 and December 2012 mostly in El Alto, but also in La Paz (Bolivia) and consisted of participant observation and conducting narrative interviews. For the purpose of this study, we selected from the broad range of data, five interviews that were carried out with parents whose children are currently in the streets and ten interviews with street educators. Upon granting verbal informed consent, parents and educators were invited to engage in a biographical-narrative interview (Rosenthal, 2004) that focused on their experiences of living and working with children in street situations. Each interview took approximately 60 to 120 minutes to complete. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

### 1.2. Procedure

During the ethnographic research street educators and parents were contacted during two periods. From March 2011 until May 2011, the first author contacted five institutions (rehabilitation centres and street-based/outreach centres) in El Alto and La Paz, through snow-ball sampling. All five non-governmental (NGO) institutions gave permission to the first author to do interviews with their care workers and allowed the author to participate in daily activities (street work, free kitchen, educational workshops). Thirty-one care workers agreed to participate. For this study, we focused on interviews with street educators, which consisted of five women and five men from different professional backgrounds. Interviews started with the question: "Do you remember the first time you were in contact with children and young people in street situations?" which expanded to other themes such as, views on children in street situations, experiences of success and failure in working with the population, and future aspirations in their work life.

From February 2012 until the end of September 2012 the first author participated in the daily work of a street-based NGO in El Alto. At the end of August 2012, children and young people in street situations were given information on the research project with parents and were asked if they allowed the first author to contact their family members. Although children were involved in the broader research project, this paper focuses only on the stories of parents of children in street situations, which have been rarely heard in academic research. The aim is to explore the interplay between the voices of the parents and the voices of the educators, as both adult groups strive for a better life for children in street situations. Some limitations of leaving out children's voices will be elaborated further in the discussion part. After explaining the idea, twenty one children gave their parents' telephone numbers and permission to call them. Two parents refused an interview, four agreed but did not show up at the appointment and ten parents were not reached because of a non-existent number or because the call was never answered. The first author asked the parents where they felt safe to talk about their child in private. Consequently, some interviews were conducted in the locations of the NGO, others were conducted at the parents' homes. All five interviews of the parents were included for this analysis. The opening question was: "Do you remember the day you knew you were pregnant with [daughter]?" and parents were further asked to narrate about moments and events they valued as important in the lives of their daughters.

### 1.3. Researcher

The interviews were conducted by the first author, a Belgian-Bolivian psychologist and researcher. The researcher's knowledge of Spanish mixed with Aymara influences and her experiences of working with children in street situations facilitated the interview process.

### 1.4. Participants

The participants consisted of on the one hand five female and five male street workers with different professional backgrounds (psychologists, social workers, pedagogists and experienced educators without specific diploma). Their working experience ranged from four months to almost ten years.

On the other hand five[2] parents agreed to participate in the interviews. Although gender was not a requirement, all five participants were parents of girls[3] in street situations between the ages of 16 to 18. The four mothers and one father were all born outside of the city of El Alto, coming from the rural areas of the province of La Paz. They migrated in their teenage years for work or – in case of some women - followed their husbands. Not long after their arrival and still in their teens they became parents. More on the socio-demographic data of the family context of the girls' early childhood and now are presented in table 1.

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[2]Due to the small sample size of the parent group, we take into account the possibility of not having reached a large range of possible cases or more extreme experiences, in order to obtain data that might contradict or modify the analysis.

[3]We did not reach the parents of the boys in street situations. We are not sure why, but we have noticed that, already from the start of the study,we obtained more telephone numbers for the parents of girls. This could perhaps be because the researcher is female and therefore had more easily contact with the girls. Further from the experience in the field study, we were more aware of girls having contact with parents as they leaned on them for support and advice when they became pregnant. The street educators and the researcher had more contact with parents during those circumstances, and hence we could ask more easily for participation. Note, this does not mean boys have less contact with their parents. Boy's parents participated in the subsequent participatory action research with parents.

| | Family situation in early childhood years | Family situation in September 2012 |
|---|---|---|
| **Ana**<br>**(Lily's mother)** | At the age of 17, Ana had Lily's older brother. Not very long afterwards she met Lily's father, migrated from her home in the rural areas to El Alto, and was pregnant with Lily and her twin brother. The twin brother died because of health problems in his first year of life. The family lived in a house of father's family. Ana suffered physical abuse from Lily's father. | Ana is now a single mother of seven children from two fathers. All but two children live in the house. The family had and still has financial problems, even though things got better when Ana separated from her husband. Now she works as a market vendor. Ana receives support of her family, although they live in the rural area. Lily is now 17 and after periods of being in an institution, with her family in El Alto and in the country side, she is now back in the streets. Lily has contact with mother (through phone) and visits her siblings at home when mother is not around. |
| **Helen**<br>**(Marisol's**<br>**mother)** | At the age of 17, Helen became pregnant of Marisol right after she migrated from the rural area. She left her family to follow her husband. When Marisol was born, she lived with her little family in the house of her parental grandparents. Six months after her birth her father left her for another woman. Helen suffered physical abuse from Marisol's father. | Helen is now a single mother of two children from two fathers. Mother works as a vendor in a little store. Behind the store she rents three rooms for her family. Marisol is now eighteen and back again in the streets after a time in a youth delinquency centre and her house. Marisol comes regularly back home after weekends or weeks in the streets. |
| **Sofia**<br>**(Catalina's**<br>**mother)** | At the age of 15, Sofia left her home to follow her husband she barely new to El Alto. Not long after, she became pregnant. Her daughter, Catalina, is the fifth child of seven (one daughter died). Sofia suffered physical abuse from Catalina's father. Sofia's husband died when she was 30 years. | After the dead of Catalina's father, Sofia met her current husband and had two other children. Catalina is now 13 and a year in the streets. Mother still lives with four children. It has been a year the mother did not see her daughter. Catalina rang her three times, for birthdays and mother's day. |

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|---|---|---|
| **Ellen**<br><br>**(Eva's mother)** | Eva was born at home third out of nine children. With her parents and two siblings, Eva lived during her first birth year in a bedroom in the house of paternal grandparent's house in El Alto. When she was 1 year and 3 months, she was sent to her grandmother in the countryside. Grandmother wanted to help the mother as she struggled with her children and a husband who had an alcohol problem and maltreated her. Up to when she needed to go to kindergarten, she lived with her grandmother in countryside. | The family now owns a house and a little store. Eva is now 17. She ran to the streets almost two years ago. Due to her severe medical condition, Eva was send from the night shelter to a hospital. Mother and her father want to pay Eva a residence in a rehabilitative institution, but Eva refuses. Eva stayed a couple of weeks at her home, regained strength and ran away again. This happened three months before the interview. Since then there is no more contact. |
| **Richard**<br><br>**(Reina's father)** | When his twin daughters, Rita and Reina, were born Richard lived with his wife and three older children in El Alto. When Rita and Reina were 6 months, Rita died. Richard and his wife were not working and were struggling with alcohol abuse. Weeks and months of binge drinking were no exception. When Reina was five, Richard decided to separate from his wife and take all his children to his mother's home in the countryside. Nevertheless he kept on drinking, ended up in jail and eventually all his children were placed in institutions | Richard is now a single father. The family has broken apart between the streets (Reina), institutions (younger siblings) and own family life. Richard is going to church and has stopped with binge drinking. Reina is now 15 (since her 11 years on the streets) and recently started to have more contact with her father. She refuses to have contact with her mother. |

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### 1.5. <u>Study Setting</u>

El Alto is a young city in the Altiplano plateau of Bolivia. From the outskirts of La Paz it developed into the second largest city in the country, with a total population of over one million inhabitants. Rural to urban migration has resulted in the rapid urbanisation of El Alto. According to the population census of 2001 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, INE, 2001), seventy three percent of the population identify themselves as having Aymara roots. A little less than a third of the population lives in extreme poverty and approximately 59% of the population are below the age of 24 (INE, 2001). At the time of the study the children in street situations mainly congregated around La Ceja, which is the very busy economic centre of El Alto and the corridor with the city of La Paz. In contrast with the image we have of children in street situations, young people in street situations in El Alto do not sleep in the streets due to the cold and harsh weather but stay in 'alojamientos', motels which lodge them illegally. As children and children and young people need to pay these motels they search for financial means through street work, theft, drug dealing and commercial sexual exploitation.

### *1.6.* <u>Data analysis</u>

We conducted a narrative thematic analysis of parents' and street educators' life stories of their shared lives with young people in street situations; with the aim of finding out how parents and educators construct the experiences of young people entering and leaving street life. A narrative approach allowed us to grasp a holistic understanding of how experiences are given meaning in the context of people's lives (Bruner, 1990). The analysis followed a two-stage process, beginning with a largely bottom-up interpretative procedure, describing the interviews thematically. The first author immersed herself in the transcribed interview material. She had conducted the interviews herself and was therefore familiar with the material. As recommended by qualitative researchers, repeated readings helped to identify possible avenues for analysis and key themes that seemed to emerge from the data (Riessman, 2008). According to McAdams (1997, as cited in Phoenix, 2013), these themes cluster around recurrent content in stories, in this case in stories of entering and leaving the streets. One of the recurrent themes to emerge from all of the participants' accounts was '*cambio*' or change. For example, all educators and parents talked about how the child needed to change in order for her to leave the street life. As recurrent themes are often embedded within different sorts of stories (Phoenix, 2013) the theme 'change' was then subjected to further analysis by looking at all stories of life events involving change and analysing the interactions between different actors in these change stories. We distinguished four stories wherein the key theme of change emerged: Home life when girls reached the age of 11 or 12, the moment of running away, street life and leaving street life. In the second step of the analysis, we reviewed findings in the light of existing research on 'change' from street / homeless youth literature, youth delinquency literature and literature on youth drug abuse. Findings are presented below together with illustrative extracts from the narratives.

### 2. *Findings*

#### 2.1. *Home life at the age of eleven, twelve*

In all interviews parents spoke about a moment of change in the behaviour of their daughters when they reached the age of eleven or, twelve. Parents identified these changed behaviours as a precursor to the child leaving home. In the following excerpts Ana[4] describes how Lily did not have an easy childhood as her father struggled with alcohol addiction and other problems like unemployment and poverty. Ana, herself, suffered severe abuse by him even when pregnant with Lily. Nevertheless, Lily was adored by her father and his family, to a point that:

> **Ana**: And my mother in law, she felt she owned her. Well, they held her because – even my sister in law had rights – as my husband was like that [drunk]. So, me too – because I had other little ones – I was more dedicated to them. And they believed they owned her.

Ana felt her mother role was taken away by her family in law and this was one of the reasons she found it difficult to give Lily affection and felt disrespected in her authority.This family dynamic changed when Lily was about eleven:

> **Ana:** She must have been eleven, twelve years. She did not want to go to them and she stayed with me. Later she saw what her dad did to me, so she began to hate her father. There was a big change. As her father did not work, she told me: "I will go to work". She even got some work with a lady, as a nanny. She also said: well why does he [father] only care about me, and not my brothers and sisters?" This is something she also questioned.

During the time Ana's daughter became more critical about home life, the father's kind behaviour towards his daughter changed too.

> **Ana:** As she became a young lady, I do not know the things he thought, but he did not let her out, not even during school hours. He even began to hit her. I did not know how to defend her as he hit me too.
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> **Researcher:** What happened?
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> **Ana:** I don't know, he drank more. He was moreengagedin drinking.I do not knowwhat things,nonsensehe must have been thinking. Even, when Iwas in schoolI played with mymatesandmy dadallowed me. Butshe did not have permission.One time hehadcaught her whenhe had gone topick her up at school. She was caught playing with a male school friend,and thatfriendwaseven younger than her. When they arrived at the house, hebegan tohit her: "you silly little girl!" he yelled at her. When shewasthirteen it got worse and when she was thirteen she started togo out to the streets.
>
> [...]
>
> **Researcher:** Could you talk to Lily during this period?
>
> **Ana:** Yes, she told me that she hated him because he let her suffer and because he beat her and me, because he drank too much. There were times she said to him, while crying, that he should not drink any longer but he did and more he complied with his [side of the] family. That is why Lily hates the family of her father. I wanted to leave. But how? They [family of father] would take away my children. His brothers would take them. I did not

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[4]All names are pseudonyms.

want to leave my children. That is what they could have done to me. They even have taken me to the police. That is why I hate them so much, these people. That is why I do not speak to them. And I have blamed the father of Lily, for her leaving the house.

In the mother's narrative, she acknowledges something is wrong with how the father treats Lily, because she knows another reality, another father model, from her own youth. However, Ana does not leave Lily's father. She is scared of her family-in-law and perceives no support. She blames the father and his family for Lily leaving the house. The many strong and hatred words towards the father that the mother uses and puts in the mouth of her daughter, and the mother's own fear and passivity seem contradictory.

Another example was related by Sofia, Catalina's mother, that when Catalina was around twelve years old a man renting a room in her family house raped her several times during a period of five months. When the mother found out, the man was soon put into jail. Asking Sofia if she could recall what Catalina felt at that moment, she answered: "Because she was so young, she didn't always feel bad."
But, what the mother remembered was how Catalina started to like talking to boys and teasing them. She was also thinking about work and wanting to have a job. The mother stressed on how the sexual assault awoke Catalina's sexuality and independence: "She was awake. She was changed. She became rebellious. It was from that moment on that she went out to the streets". Sofia blames the neighbour for arousing rebelliousness in Catalina which led her to the streets.

These behaviours of the eleven year old and twelve year old girls – looking for friends, wanting to work, seeing bad things happening in the family, being conscious about it, asking parents to change family dynamics – illustrate an active posture of young people during very difficult times. This, in contrast with the parents who hang on to the status quo of the family structure and who are not responding to the needs and changes of their daughters, because of fear, lack of support or other. Finally, a disengagement of the child from her family and an involvement in friendships in the streets occurs.

### 2.2. The moment of the running away

Throughout the interviews, we asked parents to recount the day that their child went missing. Leaving home was not a rash decision. As we have seen, a lot of changes within the child happened before, but the moment the child went missing overnight for the first time remained vividly in parents' memories.

**Researcher:** Do you remember that day, what happened?

**Ana:** It must have been eleven, twelve at night that she went out. It was winter. It will be three years ago, no two and a half years . But it was in July. It was really cold. It was a very painful moment in my life, because it was so difficult for me to find her. I was looking for her frantically. It was because of him [father], because he was drunk and wanted to hit her. Because he installed gas. And he wanted to hit her and I was not there, I was selling, and when I came back: "stupid little girl", he was saying. He wanted to hit her with the

key, the one they use to install gas. And I was like: "no, you won't do that to her". I tried to talk sense into him. Yes, that day just before she left she said to me: "if you will not leave my dad, I will go", she said to me. I did not give that much importance to it as I did not think she would do it. But she did and I regret it so much.

In Sofia's narrative, she wondered why her daughter, Catalina, ran away. She explained she is aware of the sensitivities of her children towards her harsh words, but she does not understand it, as she has experienced worse with her own mother.

> **Sofia:** I said to her: "Why haven't you washed the clothes. I'll whip you". Perhaps this has provoked pain in her heart. Then she thought perhaps: "Thus far, but no more". That is what I also think. That could have been it [the reason why she ran away that night]. That is what my oldest daughter says: "when you scold us, Mommy, it hurts." It hurts? How can it hurt? That part I do not understand, for me. I do not understand. My mother abused me heavily, but I do not do that with my children. And I never offended my mother. I do not understand why my children answer me back when I give them comments. My daughters are afraid of hugging me. I also have this fear. When my daughters were little, we hugged. Now, when they are big, I don't know. Like a fear I have, or something. Because, when my daughters hug, I tell them: "you are so old and you want to cuddle? Big baby." So, that is it. We become timid.

Sofia does not understand the hurtfulness of her words. This has led Catalina – who suffered abuse from a neighbour – to cope with not being understood by her mother and to take action by leaving the house to see (male) friends, earning money and in the end leaving the house by night. In Lily's case, she warned her mother and asked her father to quit drinking, but nobody listened. These stories illustrate how two quiet little girls changed into talkative and conscious young people going against the status quo of family dynamics; how they took action when parents did not listen to them or when they saw no improvement for their situation. Thus, with which lens should we look at the decision-making processes of running away? In all the parents' stories, it was not the abuse, lack of money or food that directly led the child to the streets. As both mothers narrated the day of the running away, they became increasingly emphatic that it was also she herself, in relationship with her daughter that had an important impact in the running away. An important finding of this study is that the narratives of the day of running away included parents' role in the events. This non-responsiveness to the needs of the child is also how street educators interpret the running away. It is the story they have heard from the children.

> **Street educator:** And sometimes being a teenager, a child, a teenager, you will always have demands on your parents. Parents sleep early or have to get up early or arrive late, are not present, are always absent. The affective, psychological abandonment. There are no certainties, then I have to search, being a teenager. Then I'm in search for answers and cannot find those answers. So, I'm going to look and if I find a group maybe not that 'good'. But, if they do not consume, well, I will enter .Then I feel I am part of this family. [...] Because you always need to belong to something or someone, don't you? And if you're not finding a belonging [in the family], then sometimes you will look for belonging in this context [the streets].

Our findings illustrate how street life seemed to respond to children's social and identity needs. In the same way Bordonaro (2012) found that given the circumstances, and from children's perspectives, the street was a solution instead of the problem. These stories of disruption incited a further change within parents' narratives. This disruption caused more and more reflection within the parents about their interactions and about how both the parents and children co-construct or co-disrupt the relationship (Chu and Powers, 1995)

> **Helen, Marisol's mother:** She liked to be with her friends. She went out. That is why I went looking for her. Nothing. Sometimes I could find her and I, me too, was more ignorant at that time. I do not know what happened to me, but I scolded her in front of her friends. And this made it worse. I think she didn't like it. And so she preferred, before I came to her, to go to another place [Marisol hid from her mother]. [...] I wanted to hold her to control her, so that she couldn't go away. Worse. I think this was worse. I caused my daughter to run away even more.

This change – seen as disruption for the parents – brings us to what Jamieson and Milne (2012) talked about in their article on what this disruption of family and domestic arrangements means and whether we might see disruption as windows of opportunity for more equal relationships. Before recounting the day, parents did not talk much about their role in the running away. But when they recount the specific day of the running away, they acknowledge their role in it. Similar to Jamieson's and Milne's study (2012), the daughters were key players and agents in producing their relationships. Although they were subject to powerful control over their lives, the daughters resisted and subverted these hierarchical relationships by at the end moving from home space to the street.

At the same time, for the parents, such 'breaking points' fundamentally brought new meaning to past experiences. They opened new directions of movement as parents not only reflected on their situation, but acted on it as well.

> **Ana:** Now we defend ourselves, before we let ourselves to be abused. Now we don't allow it. I am also heavier. I gained weight since I separated from him. Now, like a cloth I hit him. Now we don't allow him to abuse us. But I separated from him more because of Lily. Because she said to me, I should have listened to her when she was eleven, twelve. She said to me: "please leave my dad, mammy". I, being stupid, I did not leave him. If I had left him, my daughter, she would never be in the streets. Until she chose to go to the street.

### 2.3. Street life

Once children are in the street they soon encounter all the actors in the streets and hence street organisations.

> **Street educator:** They are children that assumeall of theirresponsibilitiesby themselves. Beingresponsible forfeeding, clothing, food, transportation,health.They can be ten, twelve, thirteen [years old] and they already take responsibilities.If they need to sleep and if they

do nothave money, theysleep on cardboards. If they have money, they pay for an accommodationwith cable TV, full breakfast and everything.

During this period the parents do not have much contact with their daughters and if so, it is on the child's terms. Parents search for their children and after a while they know the places where to look, but they do not find them because the children hide. So parents receive telephone calls or visits according to the will of their child. That worries the parents as they do not know how the child survives in the streets:

> **Ellen, mother of Eva:** While my child is walking through the streets, the sun [at an altitude of 4100m long-lasting exposure to the sun causes health problems], cold, rain. Where does she sleep? Where is a room for her to rest? What does she eat? All these things I am thinking.

As time passes by, street educators and parents notice how street life caught up on their young people:

> **Street educator:** Like, in a first moment their attitude is much more timid, much more modest. One notices that there is a recognition of the other, that there are attitudes of solidarity, of helping the others. Or someone still mentions some family tie. This is important this family tie, that he/she has a family reference. But all these types of attitudes and behaviours, you see them, by the process the children have in the street, you see these attitudes erode a bit. These values that they can have of trust, solidarity, but through this process in the street they lose it gradually.

> **Ana, mother of Lily:** Afterwards I told her: "there is another option. When you will be seventeen, you can enter evening school." She said: "that is what I will do, because I will graduate and then study to be a hairdresser". But now it seems that she is only interested in the streets. It has been fifteen days since I have seen her. And then she calls me in the night and says to me: "mommy, I'll come home", she says to me. "Yes, come home now, daughter. I won't argue with you. I won't fight", I'll tell her. But she never comes. Three times she rang me, and telling me she will come home. But she doesn't.

A street educator and a parent elaborate on why children lose their values:

> **Street educator:** Well the problem is their consumption of inhalants, drugs, base paste, marijuana, and alcohol. It is very involved parallel to all this [street life], and then also within this. It is like consumption is an escape from the reality of life, not accepting a reality without family around, no mother, father, brothers. And if there is, there is a rejection. Then it is like an escape. And there is no self-love. [...] Then there is nothing. Like it is dead. Then that is how I live, sleepwalking.

> **Ellen, mother of Eva:** I asked my daughter: "how come you can't change? Why do you consume [thinner] as much? This foolishness will kill you! Why can't you change?" Then my daughter, she cries. It is her addiction. "It's like a hunger that calls me", she says. And then she weeps. She throws it (drug) away, but quickly picks it up again. Because it's an addiction. Her body asks for it and keeps her under control.

In these stories parents and educators observe how this time around – unlike the time when children lived at home –, the children do not seem to be engaged in changing their harmful situation, being consumed by drug addiction and street life. Parents now take control over their own lives again: leaving abusing husbands, changing aggressive behaviour, being more conscious about parenthood. All too late, as it seems that street life has caught up on their daughters.

### 2.4. Leaving the streets?!

In street children literature, children and young people with a longer history of contact with the streets are often considered irretrievable, without hope, lost (Bordonaro, 2012). The following extracts offer examples of participants commenting on the possibility of leaving the street.

> **Street educator:** There are possibilities. I believe that when a girl is pregnant and is going to have a baby, I think the decision is much stronger to improve (the situation), for the child. "It's because, I am going to have a child". I think, in these situations, to decide if one should change, often the girls assume it for their children. But when people are alone and are trapped in the issues of theft and consumption – from what they tell us, from my talks with them: "No I'm going to die on the street because I have nobody for whom I need to do anything anymore".

Another street educator adds:

> **Street educator:** Finding a project, a family member, not always in the family home, it can also be the aunt and this and really embraces him[/her] with a monitoring of an institution, this will give him[/her] the possibility to decide to change. The person always needs to have something, a sense of life.

Street workers mentioned that they believed in change when young people are engaged in relationships that require them to change their life. For example, pregnancy can be a turning point in life. This new social bond of a special relationship with a new person that they value as important, is a motivation to make some life changes. This kind of new relationship is one example of what developmental criminology has called 'turning points' (Sampson and Laub, 1993). Another social bond (see second educator) consists of pre-existing relationships with the family. These are people who had not been able to prevent the participant from going to the streets in the past but now, in new circumstances, these relationships might play a significant role in the process of constructing willingness to change. Cid and Martí (2012) call these kinds of renewed social bonds 'returning points'. These new circumstances consist of the supportive role of the family and partners during street life, which may influence the participant to make some life changes.Our findings demonstrate that young people and parents only have contact depending on when and for how long the young person chooses to visit the parent. The role of support is a necessary element in building a feeling of self-efficacy but they may play this role only when the person who receives support is also bonded with family, a partner, or both (Cid and Martí, 2012). This support and new bonding is difficult as parents are now on the sideline of the lives of their children and are dependent on the willingness of their children.

When we asked how street educators work with the young people towards change, they answered similarly to other educators in recent academic research, namely by offering hope and understanding (Herth, 1998; Nalkur, 2009a, 2009b; Savenstedt & Häggstrom, 2005).

> **Street educator:** And, a word of encouragement is the part where you say to them: you can and you can and you can and you can. [...] So, they give alternatives and possibilities and that is what I think, is the success of the organisations. [...] We work always with the pedagogy of tenderness. This facilitates me in engaging with them and in working with them from a psychological level. Observing the behaviours they have, from that you can see the reading. [...] If a boy tells you: look, I suffered abuse. Wow, what happened? And you put yourself in the shoes of this other person and you look for answers. But you learn how to be with this person when you put yourself in their shoes.

Street educators also dwelled on the importance of looking at children, not as victims, but as actors with rights and resilience.

> **Street educator:** The children and young people in street situations, because of all these extreme situations that they have gone through and because they have suffered violations of their rights, they have these special qualities. Because, not every child that suffered abuse at home, goes to the streets or puts him[/herself] in a street situation. They themselves, of their own decision, have preferred to go to the streets instead of continuing to live within the family nucleus. So you have to acknowledge these positive things of children, which will allow them to change in the future. [...] And we do not put him as a victim saying: Poor little child! I will feed you. I will give you a bed. You will be fine. But rather say to him[/her]: well my friend, you are a man or a woman with all the capabilities that are necessary to develop well and have a full life, as you want it. But, first you have to recognize that for yourself. [...] So this is my job. That there is this acknowledgement that he[/she] is that person with many capabilities, so that there can be a change.

This discourse matches with research that sees 'street children [...] as empowered social *beings* able to construct meaning and effect change in their world' (Kovats-Bernat, 2006: 4). Unfortunately, as a street educator states: "Still, very few children in total reality of street situations have made it out of this situation or have changed for the better."
Participants also mentioned different challenges:

> **Street educator**: So you do not have the control of the population because they are on the streets. And this is the complication, this is a difficult challenge, the biggest challenge for organisations in the street. Also, because you only work during working hours. You can work with them in the morning and in the afternoon they can already be flying [Spanish translation is "volando" meaning that they have inhaled and are intoxicated].

Similar to parents, it is not easy for street educators to be in contact with young people and even more, to control them as they choose the moments of contact. Richard, Reina's father, told us that when Reina is at home he concedes with everything she wants, even inhaling glue in the house. He fears Reina will otherwise return to the streets. Nevertheless, Reina repeatedly runs away. Richard hopes one day "she will come to understand that this is not life" and that she will change. Bordonaro (2012) also noticed that calls for the protection of children's rights are commonly associated with concern for controlling and managing children and young people. There is a paradox. Educators advocate for the acknowledgment of children's agency, and at the same time it is also regarded as an obstacle to the process of change.

Remarkable when juxtaposing parent's and educators' stories is the finding that there is almost no contact between street organisations and the family. Although educators narrated about the importance of family in the process of change, they do not act on this thinking. This demonstrates that organisations focus on the individual solutions even though they acknowledge it is a social problem coming from poverty, migration, family problems and more.

The stories of the parents are filled with desperate measures as they are on the side-line of their children's lives. Not only as a consequence of their children not always inviting them in, but also as a result of the approach of some child services.

> **Helen:** I didn't know what to do in these moments [her daughter was going out to the streets at night again]. Because, my cousins were coming from Argentina. The only solution was to send her [her daughter] far away with my cousins. So I travelled to the country side [where the mother's family lives]. I went to talk. It was just these days that she [the daughter] was staying over in the neighbour's house. It was a friend of my daughter's girlfriends, from secondary school. He hosted her, he said. From there her friends took her to Child Protection Services [CPS]. From there, they called me. They [from CPS] yelled at me: "What kind of a mother are you? You have abandoned her!" You know what my daughter said to them? That I threw her out of the house. They [CPS] yelled at me. Not at any moment did I throw her out. They insulted me. They called me a whore and everything. [...] But I have endured it. From then on, they took my daughter away from me. After 10 months I learned that she was in [a shelter].

Throughout the stories we heard parents becoming aware of their parenting and wanting to be part of the lives of their children. We heard street educators underscore the importance of (family) support in the process of leaving the streets. At the same time there is a silence between both adult groups. The parents and educators seem to work like two different islands pulling and pushing the young people from and towards different directions, and in doing so they possibly counterwork each other. In the meantime, the young people are stuck in the middle, in the streets; never really losing agency as they decide when to be in contact with the home space and the institutional space.

### 3. **Discussion**

This study presents some important moments of change in the stories of parents of young girls in street situations in Bolivia and in the stories of street educators working with them.

At the age of eleven or twelve the parents observed a change in their daughters. They became different from their other children, more aware, engaged and rebellious. As we looked closer to the stories, the daughters were being more conscious about things that went wrong in their families. As girls asked for a change in the family household and as they did not obtain it, they disrupted the family system dramatically by leaving their home. Even though the girls lacked support, they were still able to change their own circumstances, the course of their lives and that of their family. Therefore, we can say that at home girls demonstrated incredible strength by going against the status quo in their family dynamics; creating disruption that opened new meanings within parents. The acknowledgement of their daughter's strength and wisdom is what parents uncovered with their stories: "I should have listened to her". Once on the streets, the girls learned about the street environment and met with street educators. Educators described the girls as very adept in surviving using creative methods that showed solidarity. These accounts of parents and educators support suggestions that the agency of children and young people leaving their households and living in the streets, can be described as 'thin agency' (as written by Klocker, in Pells, 2012; Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi, 2013; Payne, 2012;). The circumstances where children live in are constraining (family problems, poverty, violence), the alternative living situations they can choose from are few, but nevertheless, children's understanding of these constraints, constitute a strength capable of prompting children to act.

> "It is in respect of these unsatisfying relations that the children come to recognize their vulnerability [...]. And it is from the force of these experiences of being vulnerable, and the realization that they are no longer able to be dependent on family and kin, that the children are moved to depart in search of an alternative, and what they perceive to be more satisfying, way of living." (Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi, 2013, p. 379)

But unlike what the parents and educators wanted for their children, street life caught up with them. The girls became involved in drugs and other delinquent activities, which put them in even more danger and vulnerability. Street educators and parents talked about how the girls seemed to have lost themselves and seemed unable to effect change to strive for a 'better' life.

Where was their agency now? Well, parents and educators' narratives show it was still strongly present. But agency can be seen in different ways. The girls chose when and how they had contact with family members and street organisations. They made sure they had help when needed, but also that their autonomy was secured. These young people crossed fluidly between street and home/institutional spaces. They moved between different spaces in which they held different positions and by crossing spatial boundaries between home, organisations and the street it enabled the girls to avoid dependency (Jamieson and Milne, 2012) and to reject adult control (Mayall 2001).[5] And this latter, young people avoiding adult control, is the hitch for street educators and parents wanting to influence them to exit the space of the street. From this adult standpoint;

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[5]See Mayall (2001, chapter 9) to read more on how children negotiate a relative autonomy (within constraints that limit their choices).

agency is not used for the benefit of a constructive future. It is been used for securing children's autonomy, but with destructive consequences (theft, drug abuse, commercial sexual exploitation).

The clash we witness (also in Bordonaro, 2012) is not between the acknowledgement of agency and the lack of it, but rather between a global discourse on agency and the agency children were actually engaged in. Depending on who narrates, if the behaviours fit the narrator's expectations, it will be named as agency. That is why parents and educators sometimes shout out of desperation: 'Why can't you change?' Young people in street situations act, but not always in the direction that adults want; by distancing themselves more from and resisting powers of home and of institutional space.

Although the field has repeatedly focused on children's competent agency, discussions about maintaining aspects of adult authority are rare. As we hear a new voice in street children literature, we, together with the parents question how and what role parents (can) play in the life of children in street situations. In this study we have heard how family is more than a possibility for family reunification, which is usually realised at the end of interventions with street children. Family is a potential important social bond and support during the process of getting off the streets. Without, however, ignoring the impressive work of organisations, as street educators described: young people changed when they felt they had someone to live for. Lacking a social bond, it becomes tough leaving issues behind, such as drug abuse: "No I'm going to die on the street because I have nobody for whom I need to do anything anymore" (street educator, p. 15). Even though leaving street life may be seen as an individual choice, under individual control, yet it is unlikely to be sufficient in the presence of constraints that lie beyond a person's power. Having resources, such as within the family and opportunities is also required when going for personal change (Thomson et al., 2002). Hence, our findings show that family involvement allows young people in street situations to mobilise factors that may be present in the process of transition from street life to stable housing, such as taking part in educational programmes. These findings support evidence from recent research on family involvement in services for homeless youth in North America (Mayok, Corr and O'Sullivan, 2011), research on family involvement in young people's substance abuse treatment (Hornberger and Smith, 2011) and research on disengaging from criminal life (Cid and Martí, 2012).

Nonetheless, another key finding in our research is that parents are still forgotten in interventions for children and young people in street situations in Bolivia. More can be done to involve parents. We agree with van Blerk (2012), who suggests that in order to assure that children do have better and safer alternatives than the streets, it is necessary to take into account the social context including the (wider) family and community relations and to target the root causes of many family problems such as unemployment, poverty, and violence,. Furthermore, we conclude that policies should promote the supporting roles of families as a way of increasing young people's feeling of not being alone and thereby motivating them to strive for a better future. However, we cannot expect this bond to heal naturally, as children in street situations often deny their parents existence for diverse and important reasons. In the narratives of parents and street educators, parents are key figures that let their children down when they most needed them. Feeling alone, children ran to the

streets. Supporting Schwinger's (2007) idea about how the problematic relationship between a parent and a street child's is temporary and dynamic, our findings demonstrate that the child's act of running away made parents aware about their parenting, leading it to new openings and possible (re)new(ed) social bonds with their children.That is why the concept of returning points of Cid and Martí (2012) and reinforcing them is very interesting. Hence, we argue that it is fundamental that intervention take advantage of these changes within households and regard family as a potential supportive and collaborative factor in working with young people in street situations.

Still this study remains with the question of how family involvement in services should take place. Following Ennew (2003), the voices of all actors involved need to be heard when framing interventions. For example, policy makers, parents, street educators and children have to be very careful and think about ways that do not break the fragile relationship and trust between street educator and child when introducing family members. An even more burning question is whether young people think it is appropriate if parents become (more) involved in the process of leaving street life. As this study presents the adult perspective on entering and leaving the streets, a first-hand child perspective on these experiences was left out. The fact that we contacted the parents through the young people and that they gave permission for this project, is an indication that they are not totally opposed to it. Nevertheless, for future research it would be interesting to hear the young people's views about involving family in services.

Indeed, by involving young people in research on interventions, , acknowledges children and young people's resources and competencies rather than reinforcing notions of vulnerability (Thomas de Benítez, 2011). However, as we and other authors (Bordonaro, 2012; Mayall, 2001; Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi, 2013, Pells, 2012) have seen, it also requires more careful consideration of what agency means in the young people's daily lives, as this is tied into a much wider range of social relations which are in turn bound to the socioeconomic circumstances they live in. We can imagine the reluctance of young people and children in street situations to allow family members and other adults to have a say in their lives, as their trust in adults has been broken and they deeply value their sense of independence and coping strategies (Conticini, 2005). The children in our study showed a desire to maintain their relationship with their family members and at the same time they controlled the encounters with them. It would be interesting to take the time with children and young people to understand how intervention programmes, street educators and parents can respect and facilitate their sense of independence, without rejecting the support of adults. Going back to the complex intersection that organisations face between acknowledging children's agency and the duty to protect them: acknowledging children's agency should not mean lonely autonomy, but reciprocity, interdependence and participation as members of a social organisation (Mayall, 2001). Moreover, we have seen in this study and in our participatory action research, that involving parents in research raised awareness within parents of what is happening in the streets. It created understanding and new rapprochements by bringing the family world or adult world closer to the street world or young people's world instead of the other way around, as is usually done in reintegration programmes.

Since the United Nations International Year of the Child in 1979, and more so in the mid-1980s, academics intensified their focus on children and young people in street situations. However, after more than 30 years, where is the voice of the parents? Although listening to parents is not as straightforward as we might wish, this study has shown that it can be done and that it is worthwhile. There is still so much to learn from all actors who do not want to be on the side-line.After all, 'Why can't you change?' is not a question directed to one person, but to each one of us.

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