Designing Spaces of Learning with a Child Rights Approach and Participatory Planning

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ABSTRACT

The paper outlines the challenges faced by street-connected children in India, particularly the lack of accurate data and the failure of governance systems to address their needs. It introduces the Rag Dreams Weaver Association case study in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, focusing on their mentorship programs to empower street-connected children in urban planning and policy-making processes. The paper argues for the inclusion of youth voices in participatory design, challenging traditional skepticism within city agencies. It suggests that involving young people in decision-making can rectify historical planning errors and create more equitable urban environments.

Keywords – Street Connected Children, Youth Mentorship, Participatory Design, Urban Planning

1.   Introduction

According to the Homeless World Cup, there are over 19 million people living on the streets in India (Chari, 2021). However, a significant dearth of data collection and management strategies has led to a huge disparity in calculating the number of street children. Estimates are provided by NGOs working on the ground instead of a centralized agency and range from 0.2 million to 18 million (Sankunni, 2021). In addition to the lack of data, street-connected children remain some of the most underserved members of Indian society from a governance point of view, as their needs often go overlooked at the intersection of poverty-based policies for adults and education-based policies for students in formal education systems. McKoy and Garcia have argued that involving youth voices in planning can help overcome historical patterns of exclusion in contemporary planning (2022). Initiatives like the Y-Plan methodology in California have successfully proven that the skepticism of city agencies that delegitimize youth voices in planning must be challenged in order to address complex issues, such as the inclusion of the needs of street-connected children. However, this argument remains to be seen in the Indian discourse around participatory design.

This paper aims to analyze how guided youth mentorship programs can help center children's voices in street situations in place-making, planning, and policy, especially in a context where formal institutes have failed to acknowledge these stakeholders or their needs. We present a case study of the Rag Dreams Weaver Association (RDWA), an NGO based in Aligarh, India, which has one of the highest percentages of street-connected children who fend for themselves. Through this case study, we argue that young people hold immense power, expertise, and knowledge for countering the historical errors made by inequitable and exclusive planning decisions.

2. Background

Existing scholarship on the financial and psychosocial needs of street-connected children is limited globally and even more so in India. It wasn't until the late 1980s that the category of 'street children' was recognized as a vulnerable population, and March 2011 saw the first dedicated session on issues related to street-connected children at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) (Dabir, 2014). Following this session, on 24 March 2011, UNHRC adopted Resolution 16/12, namely 'Rights of the Child: A Holistic Approach to the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Children Working and/or Living on the Street.' The resolution pushed for a more pronounced move towards 'addressing discrimination, encouraging social inclusion, and assuring enjoyment of all rights' for street-connected children while adopting a 'holistic, child-centered, gender-sensitive approach' (UNHRC, 2011). The resolution was supported by a joint partnership between the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Children's Fund, the global advocacy group Consortium for Street Children (CSC), and Aviva. The partners released a report that provided a study on 'challenges, lessons learned and best practices' to systematically address the needs of street-connected children at a national, regional, and local level (OHCHR, 2011). Some of the key takeaways from this report include:

- A shift in terminology from 'street-child' as adopted by the Commission on Human Rights in 1994 to 'children in street situations' to recognize that children are social actors, and the street is a situation they find themselves in, have different relationships with, and perform multiple roles on.
- An effort to challenge the depiction of street children either as 'delinquents' to be detained or penalized (repressive approach) or 'victims' that need to be 'rescued' (welfare approach), and instead to adopt a rights-based approach where children are "rights-holders," who are entitled to the same rights and protections by the state, as other residents.

In light of the rights-based approach, the OHCHR report further emphasized the role of increasing the children's participation and promoting the inclusion of their voices in policy and placemaking (2011). They included snippets from CSC's findings of interactions with children in street situations from countries in India and Africa. From interactions with Indian children, it was revealed that the children understood their rights to 'survival, protection, development and participation' well (p. 20) and were inspired by teachers and parents who 'showed them the right path to life' (p.25). Further, the children expressed interest in being taught to develop their skills such that they could contribute to their household incomes, deal with conflicts, and help support their neighbors or younger children in similar situations (p. 27 & 32). Lastly, they emphasized the role of empathetic NGO workers who helped them become aware of their 'right to education, protection, health, and play (p.36).

McKoy et al. argue that in order to plan cities that truly address the needs of the most marginalized and disadvantaged communities, such as street-connected children, the unique perspectives of young people can offer 'insightful local knowledge' that helps develop solutions that are both just and joyful (2021). Embodying this approach is the Rag Dreams Weaver Association (RDWA), a registered not-for-profit design and community development organization active in Aligarh, a tier-2 city in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India, since 2019. The organization trains and connects youth mentors with children in street situations to help co-create an empathetic space where the children can dream fearlessly. The youth mentors help implement tailored interventions to the street situations of each child by collaboratively

working with the children to bring change at the familial, community, public, and governance levels. Thus, 'Rag Dreams' represents children's dreams in street situations, which are aided into reality by the youth 'Weavers' who undergo a rigorous 'Learning Mentorship Model.' Through this mentorship, the organization aims to change behaviors and practices at the community level and influence public policy at a systemic level – thereby creating an ecosystem where street children are made a priority. The methodology imagines children as capable agents in their own lives who must be involved in decision-making. Through this initiative, the organization targets 2 critical Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with the aim to provide quality education to all (SDG 4) and actively reduce inequalities within the community (SDG 10).

2.1 The Learning Mentorship Model

The Learning Mentorship is a systematically designed, 10-month learning program that gives youth opportunities to understand children's street situations empathetically. The program aims to create a pool of youth change-makers who understand the mechanism of self-change and are committed to creating an empathetic society for children.

A learning mentor treats each child as a unique individual and supports children in making changes in their lives that they want to envision for themselves. The mentors also engage with the larger community, including parents or guardians, public officials from the Police, local governance and municipalities, and other urban development organizations involved in the jurisdiction of the informal settlements to which these children belong. This is essential for obtaining resources while actively challenging negative attitudes and systematic discrimination, which leads to the neglect and abuse of children in street situations. The mentorship is divided into 4 phases, and each phase trains them to develop different sets of 21st Century Skills, including:

Phase 1: Awareness and Relationship Building: The mentors get acquainted with the realities of street situations and build meaningful relationships with children through 5 sessions focusing on developing safe spaces where children feel comfortable sharing their vulnerabilities. The mentors also receive a theoretical understanding of Child Protection Policies, the Child Growth Track, Child-Centered Practices, and the Child Rights Approach.

Phase 2: Intervention to Understand: Motivated to solve problems, in this phase, mentors, along with their team of children, build a deeper understanding of the issues they have been exposed to and get introduced to new tools and techniques to start their journey of problem-solving. The teams expand their understanding of the problems to include the lens of stakeholders and beneficiaries while identifying sources of actual, relevant data to support their findings.

Phase 3: Intervention to Solve: The teams are exposed to the 21st-century skills of creativity, collaboration, and sustainability to find innovative interventions to solve and address the adversities of children in street situations. While spending more time with community members, the youth mentors focus on problem-solving by analyzing contexts and proposing innovative solutions that challenge pre-existing notions. With an emphasis on a collaborative mindset, the teams work towards analyzing the actual impact of their solutions for the beneficiaries.

Phase 4: Action and Way Forward: Finally, the teams focus on implementing their projects on the ground while constantly iterating them to make them self-sustainable. Efforts are made to include all community members in the process and ensure that they have ownership and experience belonging through the interventions while targeting systemic issues in the children's lives.

The organization supports the interventions through expertise, finances, and logistics while encouraging the mentors to work on both Project Growth and Personal Growth.

In 2022, a group of architects collaborated with the mentors at RDWA to address the needs identified through the Learning Mentorship Model through participatory design. This led to the construction of the 'Samarathya Shaala,' a specially designed classroom where children in street situations can play, learn, and safely dream. Reflecting on the design processes and solutions that emerged through this participatory process, this paper attempts to answer the following questions:

a. Can guided youth mentorship programs help center street-connected children's voices in place-making, planning, and policy, especially in a context where formal institutes have failed to acknowledge them?

Figure 1: Mentors interacting with the children and their families within an informal settlement.
Source: Rag Dreams Weavers Association, 2021.

3. Methodology

In January 2022, the design team began conversations with the mentors at RDWA to understand their findings from the Learning mentorship over the last three years. This included demographic data and critical learnings from over five years of dedicated grassroots research on how these children learn and

interact with each other, their educators, and the physical environment. The design for a semi-structured, design-cum play space was conceptualized, informed by the concept of 'Building as a Learning Aid.' The project site was located at the Aligarh Junction Railway Station as part of an ongoing partnership with 'Bharat Scouts and Guides' and North-Central Railways. The construction of the project has been funded by the Saint Gobain Grants Program 2021- 22.

Rather than constructing solely on the architectural interpretation of the built environment, the team elected to undertake a process whereby the street-connected children affiliated with RDWA would identify the priority areas and which parts of their lives could be most improved with targeted spatial design applications. Numerous and wide-ranging consultations with the children were organized and arranged over a period of 6 months, and they were involved in the actual process of site surveying, construction, painting, and maintenance as well. The children included various students affiliated with the organization and other formal or informal schooling systems for different periods of time. Newer students contributed knowledge about how they would like to learn, whereas older or more experienced children provided insights into patterns of learning they themselves had observed amongst peers. A few students who had been affiliated with the organization for over three years were given designated responsibilities throughout the feedback and implementation stage. Their key role was to help bring diverse voices from their neighborhoods into the design process.

Throughout the construction process, ownership was actively developed within the children for the space, and they were encouraged to use the space as their own, in addition to attending classes, practicing their lessons using the built environment tools and teaching each other, even with minimum to no intervention from mentors.

Figure 2: "Give us the opportunity to change our stories." Source: Rag Dreams Weavers Association, 2022.

4. Co-creating learning spaces with youth and children in street situations.

Existing government policies in India, especially around Education, do not cater to the unique needs of street-connected children who cannot access schools due to their economic or social situation. Even when welfare schemes help enroll them into government schools, they often drop out due to the significant gaps in previous education, disconnection with their peers, or the requirement for them to earn wages to feed themselves and their families. In addition to the welfare schemes failing to cater to their education, these children additionally face abuse, discrimination, and violence from within and outside their communities daily and tend to fall into patterns of substance abuse from an early age. Education lies at the center of empowering these children to break their systemic cycles of oppression. However, to do so, the learning process must be systemically reimagined to incorporate the fragility of their situations while being flexible enough to ensure that each child can learn at their own speed and become an empowered and informed citizen of 21st-century India.
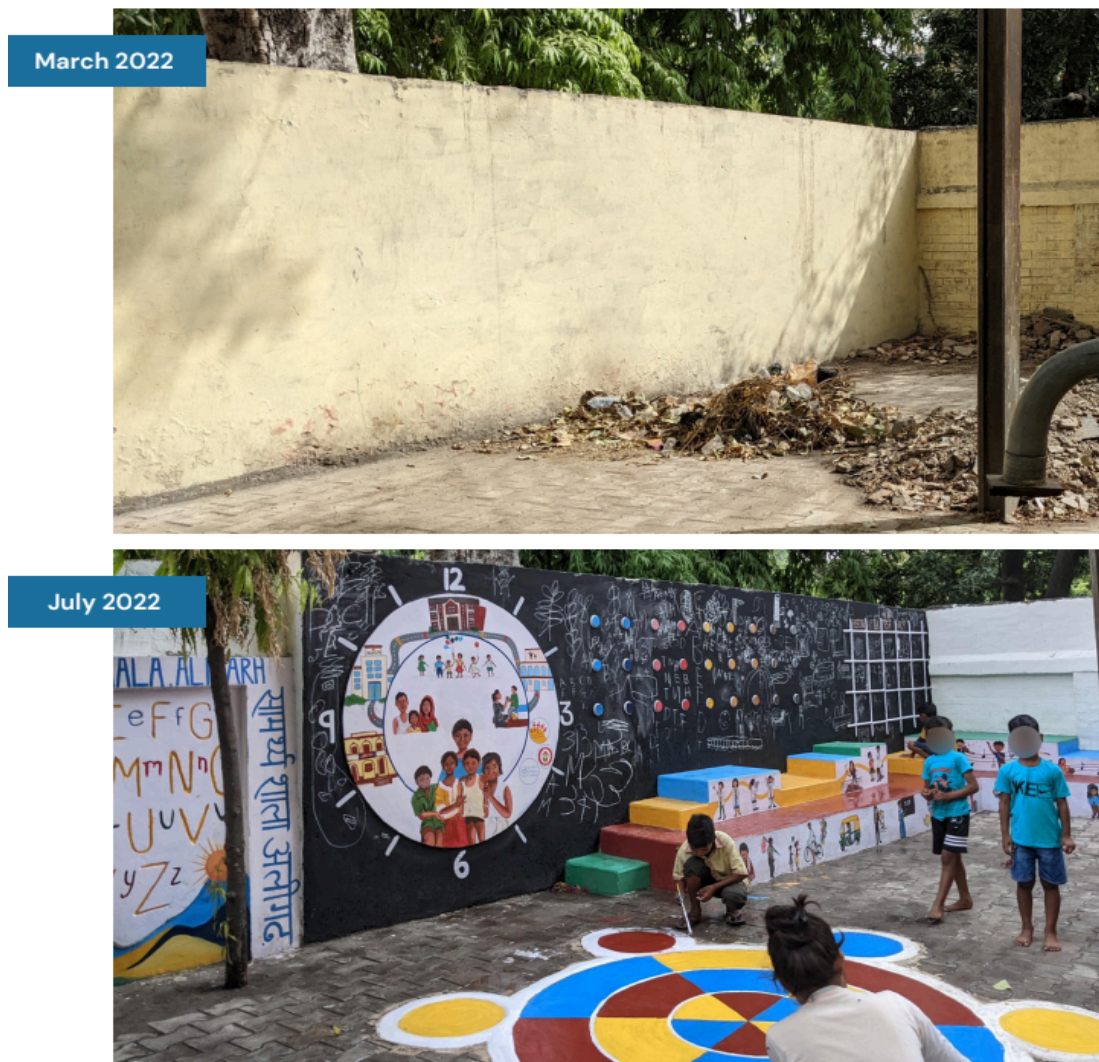

Figure 3: Before and after views of Samarthya Shaala. Source: RDWA, 2022

4.1 Tools for Primary Education

Data from over three years of mentorship programs revealed that these children had to overcome significantly different obstacles while receiving primary education as compared to students who had been continuously affiliated with formal schooling systems. For example, even at the age of 13 or 14, many of the children had never held a pencil, seen anybody writing, or heard of the alphabet. Thus, the initial challenge was not to teach them what to write but to provide physical training on how to write.

Another insight from the mentorship was the emphasis on the student's short attention span and lack of motivation or ability to memorize something as new and strange as the English alphabet. However, the same students demonstrated incredible speed at learning when the alphabet was taught as visual shapes rather than memorized scripture. A third learning that emerged from the mentorship was that even though the students communicated verbally in Hindi, they were highly motivated to learn English and demonstrated incredible interest and passion for spelling out their names. These learnings were translated into 2 key tools (Figures 4 and 5), which converted the process of reading and writing into a highly tactile and playful experience.

Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 4: Developing wrist mobility for writing by navigating the bead through differently shaped rods.
Source: RDWA, 2022

Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 5: Learning the alphabet by moving their fingers through engravings on the wall.
Source: RDWA, 2022

4.2 Tools for 21st Century Skills- Spaces for playing, sharing, and dreaming

Intimate interactions with the students affiliated with the organization for over 3 years revealed that 60% of them beg for survival, 20% support their families by running small businesses or vending on the street, and 20% are engaged in other forms of child labor. All of them face religious discrimination, verbal and physical abuse, and neglect daily. 70-80% of male children become victims of tobacco, alcohol, and/or substance abuse by the age of 7, and the number can rise to 90-100% by adolescence unless drastic interventions are undertaken. While the numbers for substance abuse in girls are less, they are additionally susceptible to issues like child marriage, early onset of domestic

and child-rearing responsibilities, sexual harassment, and sexual violence (street and domestic). Gendered norms in society also restrict girls' accessibility to both formal and informal education opportunities.

In order to survive their perilous conditions, the students require more than primary education and must additionally be equipped with 21st-century skills that allow them to communicate their struggles and learn to cope with them in healthy and sustainable ways. The space was thus designed to create opportunities for creative expression (Figure 6), collaboration and communication (Figure 7), and self-learning (Figure 5). The combination of these tools and the empathetic training of the mentors helps create a safe environment where the children can share their embodied experiences for the first time, which not only allows them to seek aid, comfort or closure but also contributes to the overall dearth of data around their experiences which can inform policy decisions at the national and global levels.

Figure 6: The entire wall is painted as a blackboard providing adequate space for the students to express their creativity while interacting each other. Source: RDWA, 2022

Figure 7.1: The varying heights and widths of the seating platforms enables the students to togethercustomize the space for their own needs.Source: RDWA, 2022

Figure 7.2: Ownership of the space combines with the ease of the tools to promote an empathetic space for co-learning. Source: RDWA, 2022

Figure 8: The design also recognizes that providing opportunities for playing and experiencing joy are of as much importance as education and healing. Source: RDWA, 2022

4.3 Fostering natural growth and self-sustainability.

In addition to addressing the children's unique learning and socio-emotional needs in street situations, the mentorship revealed that the children's personal experiences shape their lack of trust in adults, especially those affiliated with the government or the Police. Additionally, the students suffer from issues of abandonment and are deeply impacted by the loss of trusted relationships like the ones they develop with the youth during the mentorship period.

These issues are tackled by the space through a multi-tiered process. The Circle of Life (Figure 9) depicts the varying layers of stakeholders and individuals that are available to the children at different times of need. While involving the students through the construction process helped develop an initial perception of ownership, this is further strengthened by programming interactive events with government stakeholders (Figure 10), wherein the students are positioned as hosts and owners, and the adults are invited as guests into their spaces and are expected to show the children respect and kindness. Having flexible spaces and unprogrammed daily activities in the space has created an environment where the students no longer rely on the mentor's classes and can continue teaching each other outside of adult supervision.

Figure 9: Circle of Life depicting the layers of stakeholders and institutions available to support the children. Source: RDWA, 2022

Figure 10: The dimensions of the space are specially designed for children to feel at ease, and for adults to acknowledge their ownership. Source: RDWA, 2022

Figure 11: Senior students have taken charge of the space. The built environment tools support the gaps in their own education and enable them to teach their younger siblings and community members. Source: RDWA, 2022

5. Conclusion

The RDWA Mentorship program in India raises an important conclusion- children's and youth's input in the development of cities and spaces is distinctly different from that of adults. Thus, it is imperative that it be included in broader policy and practice, especially if our cities are to address the unique needs of especially vulnerable groups like street-connected children. Unlike common misconceptions, children-even those from debilitating conditions are intrinsically aware of the discrimination and inequity that

surround them and can offer valuable insights from their own embodied experiences towards the production of shared public space and services. Thus, participatory design in such contexts must not only rely on strong local partnerships and participation from diverse residents, communities, and businesses but must also center the voices of the majority stakeholders, i.e., street-connected children, while working to advance their capacities. Such an inclusive process could result in policy and placemaking strategies that help enrich the value of identity, public choice, recognition, and, most importantly, safety as defined by the children themselves.

Another critical area of intervention for street-connected children is their lack of ownership over any physical environment. This is exacerbated by exclusive urban design and unaddressed systemic inequities within urban settings, further isolating them from broader society and intentionally setting them up for a difficult and unaided life. As a result, the built environment plays a critical role in creating unfavorable negative spaces and situations for street-connected children. The 'Samarthya Shaala' project demonstrates a specific example of how a society involved in building its commons can lead to projects with a sense of authority, responsibility, and ownership towards its stakeholders. Designing a space around the concept of accessibility and ownership allows the children to develop a sense of authority over the space while undertaking the responsibility to use it and maintain it well.

Through this paper, we have attempted to demonstrate how guided youth mentorship programs that center street-connected children's voices in place-making and policy can help address their systemic discrimination in contexts where formal institutes have failed to acknowledge them. At the crux of such a successful model for reform lies the fundamental child's rights approach. Thus, in order to bring change to the plight of street-connected children at a national level, their voices must be heard, and their opinions must be included in large-scale urban transformation. Government structures must undergo a paradigm shift towards one that does not pity or simply offer charity to these children but acknowledges them as capable rights holders with opinions, unique needs, and dreams of their own.

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