Article

The role of formal and non-formal education for children's empowerment and as a prevention tool from violence

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Abstract. This work is part of an on-going anthropological research, with marginalized children and adolescents in Central America and, in particular, in the Dominican Republic. It builds upon a previous ethnographic field research, by the author, whose core acquired data and research findings constitute a parameter and an interpretation tool for current qualitative analysis and updating, on this subject. The qualitative analysis of this work develops in the overall framework of the international legal standards for children's rights and their local implementation. This article analyses the case of the Dominican Republic, where school's failure in giving appropriate rights-based and life skills-based education, often affects children's fullest development and their access to a free choice for their future life. It also intends to underline the role played by a few local associations offering non-formal education and trying to compensate the gaps of formal education, at school, and of informal education, within family, in the purpose of achieving children's empowerment. This work is also an introduction to the approach, developed by the author, of anthropology of/for children's rights.

Keywords. Anthropology of children's rights, children's rights, Dominican Republic, gender, formal and non-formal education.

Resumen. Este artículo es parte de una investigación antropológica en curso, más amplia, con niñas, niños y adolescentes marginalizados en el área de América Central y, en particular, en la República Dominicana. Este trabajo se desarrolla a partir de una investigación etnográfica anterior, en el terreno, realizada por parte de la autora, cuyos datos adquiridos y hallazgos constituyen un parámetro y un instrumento interpretativo para los actuales análisis cualitativos y puesta al día, sobre este tema. El análisis cualitativo de este trabajo se desarrolla en el marco más amplio de los estándares jurídicos internacionales para los Derechos del Niño y de su implementación, a nivel local. Se analiza el caso de República Dominicana, donde la falla de la escuela en proporcionar una apropiada educación basada sobre los derechos y los life skills, a menudo, afecta al desarrollo integral del niño y su acceso a una libre elegida para su futuro. Este artículo evidencia también el papel desarrollado por unas pocas asociaciones locales que brindan educación non-formal y tratan de compensar las lagunas de la educación formal, en la escuela, así como de aquella informal, en la familia, con la finalidad de lograr el empoderamiento del niño. Este trabajo es también una introducción al abordaje, desarrollado por la autora, de una antropología de/para los derechos de la infancia y la adolescencia.

Palabras clave. educación formal y no formal, el género, la antropología de los derechos del niño, los derechos del niño, República Dominicana.

1. Introduction

The General Comments No.1, written by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, in 2001, reports that school should be consistent with the U. N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989[1], and it should focus on concepts such as the best interest of the child and a child-centred education (U. N. Committee of the Rights on Rights of the Child, 2001). The General Comment also reports that the key goal of education is the development of individual child's personality, talents and abilities, in recognition of the fact that every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities, and learning needs.

School systems should follow the principles of a rights-based education, which is a fundamental tool for preparing the child to live in a society, oriented to peace and non-discrimination.

It is also important to refer to the concept of life skills-based education, as reported in the General Comment No.1:

Basic skills include not only literacy and numeracy, but also life skills such as the ability to make well-balanced decisions, to resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner and to develop a healthy lifestyle, good social relationships and responsibility, critical thinking, creative talents and other abilities, which give children the tools needed to pursue their options in life. (U. N. Committee of the Rights on Rights of the Child, 2001, par. 9)

Moreover:

Education should also be aimed at ensuring that essential life skills are learnt by every child and that no child leaves school, without being equipped to face the challenges that he or she can expect to be confronted within life.[2]

As suggested by the independent expert Pinheiro:

There is an increasing recognition that in a rapidly changing world, it is necessary to teach children the how of constructive human behaviour so that they can protect themselves from harm and take action to avoid harm to others. School curriculum should pay attention to learning skills and processes such as inquiry, problem solving and decision-making. (Pinheiro P. S and United Nations, 2006, p. 150)

This work analyses the case of the Dominican Republic, where school's failure in giving appropriate rights-based and life skills-based education, often affects children's fullest development and their access to a free choice for their future life. This is particularly evident in gender issues, as girls' empowerment still results hampered and linked to a structural violence. This work also intends to underline the role played by a few local associations offering non-formal education and trying to compensate the serious lacks of formal education, at school, and of informal education, within family.

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[1] UNCRC full text available from <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx> (05/2016).
[2] *Ibidem.*

2. Methodological Approach

2.1 Research field sites and subjects

The present study is part of an on-going anthropological research work, with marginalized children and adolescents in Central America and, in particular, in the Dominican Republic. It builds upon a previous ethnographic field research, carried out in the Dominican Republic, during the years 2006-2007, as well as on a retrospective ethnography. The acquired data and research findings, from the field, constitute the foundations of later works, providing a parameter and interpretation tool for current qualitative analysis and updating on this subject.

Boca Chica, an internationally renowned tourist destination in the southwest coast of the Dominican Republic, was chosen as a field site, for my previous knowledge of this site, as a foreign ex-inhabitant, also having family ties, there. Due to my life experience in this place, I became aware about children's difficult situations in this area and I assumed that children and adolescents living in Boca Chica were in at-risk situation of violence. Written sources of field studies and reports, carried out by local foundations and associations[3], and by country and regional offices of International Organisations and of Dominican institutions[4], were particularly enlightening, for the construction of the field research at the base of this work. These sources highlight the vulnerability of children and adolescents living and/or working in the streets, parks and in public places, in terms of risk for all forms of exploitation, including sexual exploitation in local prostitution and in travel and tourism. Therefore, I focused on marginalised children living in the beach of Boca Chica, who were chosen, as research subjects.

The other field site of this research was Santiago, second town of the country, after the capital Santo Domingo, in the central Cibao region. Here, children and adolescents work as shoeshine children (*limpiabotas*) in the central city park (*parque)*. Children living in the beach of Boca Chica constituted a snowball sample[5] for this research. The resulting

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[3] Written sources of local foundations and associations: Fundación Educativa Acción Callejera, *Informe Final: Campaña "No me llame niño de la calle"*, Santiago, República Dominicana 2004; Fundación Educativa Acción Callejera¡Hola Dignidad!, Boletín Trimestral n°1, Santiago, República Dominicana 2006; Municipio de Santiago de los Caballeros, *Programa de Atención Directa a Trabajador(es)Infantiles Domésticos(as) en hogares de terceros y fortalecimiento del Sistema de Protección Local de Derechos de Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes del Municipio de Santiago de los Caballeros,* República Dominicana 2006; NINA (Consorcio), *Boletín*, Revista cuadrimestral N°1, Santo Domingo, República Dominicana January 2006.

[4] Written sources of International organizations: OIT/IPEC, Coordinación Sub-regional para Centroamérica, Panamá, y República Dominicana, y PROFAMILIA, Instituto de Estudios de Población y Desarrollo, *Explotación sexual comercial de personas menores de edad en República Dominicana;* UNICEF-OIM, *Trafic des Enfants Haïtiens vers la République Dominicane - Trafico de Niños Haitianos hacia la República Dominicana,* July 2002, Santo Domingo, República Dominicana; UNICEF-ONAPLAN (Oficina Nacional de Planificación), Silvestre E., Rijo J., Bogaert H., *La Neo-Prostitución Infantil en República Dominicana,* 2ª edición, Santo Domingo, República Dominicana 2003; UNICEF, Oficina de Comunicación de República Dominicana, *La Niñez es Noticia,* Año 4, N° 7, Santo Domingo, República Dominicana December2005; UNICEF, Oficina de Comunicación de República Dominicana, *La Niñez es Noticia,* Año 4, N° 8, Santo Domingo, República Dominicana, May 2006.

[5] The ethnographic method of working with a snowball sample is made up of several phases. After having interviewed some subjects with the required characteristics, they can help to identify other subjects, who can be interviewed in a following phase. These other subjects can produce, in their turn, information to identify additional persons with same characteristics, to be included in the sample, and so on. In this way, a sort of snowball effect is created. See also: Raymond Boudon, *Les méthodes en sociologie,* nouvelle édition, Puf, Paris, 1993. It is

information from the interactions with children[6] and from the participant observations became also a relevant base of discussion on child protection strategies (Binazzi Daniel A., 2012), with local educators, social workers and coordinators from associations committed for children's rights.

2.2 Fieldwork and ethnographic data production

The ethnographic strategy at the base of this work is founded on the combination of four methods of data production (Olivier de Sardan, 1995, pp. 71-109), and on their related activities:

The Participant Observation. The extended time of immersion of the researcher in the local context, in everyday life of people, allows the researcher to acquire an in-depth holistic view to better refer the actors' points of view and local meanings.

The Interview, as a talk and as an informal interaction. Bringing the interaction nearer to everyday-life informal conversation allows to reduce the artificiality of the interview situation and allows the subject to express freely. In this way, a richer of information and meaning talk can be achieved. According to it, this ethnographic fieldwork avoided structured interviews, as they tend "to guide" the expressions of the subjects in an artificial and unidirectional way.

The collection of written data "produced by local actors". This kind of data can only be retrieved in the field. Here, they were represented by local studies carried out by local organizations, local information campaigns, initiatives leaflets and local press articles. They are often incorrectly considered, as secondary data. On the contrary, data written by local actors are a relevant source to better understand the point of view of local people, equally to interviews and participant observations.

The review processes. They include the identification of associations, foundations and organizations effectively and locally working for children's rights.
    Knowledge of local language, of locally shared meanings, and my life and family experience on site constituted an asset in the access to this field. It helped to smooth the communication and to get in touch directly with children, adolescents as well as with adult people, in a more symmetric relation, without any mediator filtering it.
    With regard to the anthropological approach, it can be useful to clarify that the concept of culture, at the foundation of this work, has to be referred, according to Hannerz, to a matter of meaning (Hannerz, 1992). Culture is the meanings, which people create, and which create people, as member of societies. Culture is, in this sense, collective. To study a culture means to study the ideas, the experiences, the feelings and the *overt forms*

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important to underline that, although this kind of sample is not statistically representative, on the other hand, no comprehensive statistical census, for this group of population, is available. Therefore, in absence of statistical quantifications, it is not possible to know the exact number of children and adolescents living in the beach or in the street, in Boca Chica, nor in the streets of Santiago.

[6] It concerned 40 children and adolescents, including Boca Chica and Santiago.

of these inner aspects, when they become public, and thus, social. The *cultural flow* consists in the externalization of meanings, produced by individuals, and in the interpretation that individuals give of these externalizations (Hannerz, 1992, pp. 3-4). This dynamic view of culture, as an ongoing process, like the "*flow*" of a river, means that the flow of meaning's expression, continuously changes, re-creating new flows of meaning. Therefore, culture cannot be seen as crystallized or homogeneous, as different clusters of meaning, subcultures and micro cultures exist within a same community, according to different actors' perspectives in the cultural process.

The qualitative analysis of this work develops in the framework of the international legal standards for children's rights and their implementation (Binazzi Daniel A., 2011). More in general, this is part of a wider on-going work on anthropology of human rights and, in particular, of children's rights, with a focus on gender.

3. The Dominican case: the role of formal and non-formal education in building children empowerment

In the depicted context, a concrete empowerment of children and adolescents is fundamental in order to raise self-awareness towards at-risk situations and to build relevant life-skills. Furthermore, a rights-based education would allow children and, in particular, girls, to make a free choice for their future and to avoid perpetuating asymmetric relations of power, deriving from patriarchal patterns and structural violence. The role of formal education and of non-formal education[7] is, therefore, determinant to face these challenges and to achieve these objectives.

While analyzing the phenomena of sexually abused and exploited local children and adolescents, gender issues strongly arise (Binazzi Daniel A., 2014). Abuses might often begin, when families with scarce resources place their daughters in householders' domestic work. Usually, the initial agreement, between the family and the householder, foresees, in exchange for girl's domestic work, some money earning and some education receiving. Later, these girls are no longer allowed to go to school and can be at risk of sexual abuses and exploitation. Participation in a commission to domiciliary visits to maltreating parents, allowed to observe a recurrent intra-familiar violence. Children, completely unaware about outside at-risk situations of violence and exploitation, often abandon their homes for this reason. While trying to escape from intra-familiar violence and poverty, looking for a better chance on the street or on the beach, they end to face even worst kind of violence.

3.1 Local school system

By data collection and analysis, it emerged serious concerns, raised by local organizations working for children's rights, about local school system. Local public school finds itself in a serious condition of neglect and decay, especially in rural areas, and, particularly, regarding structural and human resources.

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[7] We would like to remind, here, the distinction among formal education, provided by the school; non-formal education, outside school, provided by other organizations, associations; informal education, taking informally place in the family and in everyday-life environment.

The main challenges, currently faced by the education system, foresee the universal alphabetization of people and their primary and secondary education; the improvement of school infrastructure, especially in rural areas; an initial and continuous quality preparation for teachers. Concerning access to school, national statistics show, in 2013-2014 school year, a drastic drop of enrolment, by the age of 14, i.e., at the end of basic cycle of studies. Only about one-third of students continue studying from *Nivel Básico* (cycle of 8 years, starting at the age of 6, by primary school) to *Nivel Medio* (following 4-year cycle of high school). It has to be observed that previously existing statistics, by providing disaggregated data, by age/school year, clearly highlighted, in 2008-2009 school year, a maximum pick of enrolled students, at the age of 8 years. From 9 years onwards, the enrolled students' number progressively decreased, until cycle's end.[8]

It is important to highlight, according to the vision of the *U.N. Global Study on Violence against Children* (Pinheiro and United Nations, 2006)*,* that school can compensate families or communities failures, providing children with a strong support. The U.N. Study also affirms that

Schools can also provide bridges between children and their families and communities, helping families and communities to understand how they affect children and to acquire the skills to become more supportive. (Pinheiro and United Nations, 2006, p. 132)

In this perspective, the school system of the studied context does not seem to provide a free access to an education for all, nor preparing children to free choices for their future life.

It is of interest to mention the outcomes of the UNICEF Study (Dottridge, UNICEF IRC, 2008) with interviewed young people of Albania, Kosovo, Moldavia and Romania, victims of child-trafficking, while they were adolescents and, later, escaped from their traffickers. They strongly affirmed the importance of disseminating information among unaware children about the risks of abandoning home and country to escape from intra-familiar violence and poverty. Violence situations resulted, then, even worst. They suggested including these life-skills education in school curricula.

Local press reports the need for a school not merely preparing children to a professional life, but also educating them to positive social values, to avoid social fragmentation and the already existing inequalities between the élite and the rest of people. If rights-based education will not find an appropriate space in school curricula, the lack of respect for human rights might also increase[9]. As part of school curricula, textbooks with their concepts and their languages – as an expression of local cultural meanings – should be carefully reviewed, to overcome the present discriminations towards vulnerable children and marginalized social groups. It is notorious that it exists a harsh ongoing public debate about difficult relations, between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, also fed by the rhetoric of past wars, for Dominican independence from Haiti, achieved in 1844. The Dominican Republic receives massive migrations, from Haiti, since decades, further increased,

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[8] Source: Ministerio de Educación de la República Dominicana (MINERD) and Oficina Nacional de Estadística (ONE). Enrolled students data, in 2013-14; available from <http://www.one.gob.do/Estadisticas/180/indicadores-de-educacion> Dominican Education System situation in 2008-09, data available from <http://www.dominicanaonline.org/Portal/espanol/cpo_estadisticaseduc.asp#2> (05/2016).

[9] See, among others, local press article: M. A. Altamira S.J., *Implicaciones de la educación,* in *Listin Diario,* Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, 5 August 2006.

after the natural disasters of the last years, also including child-trafficking. In this frame-work, the feeling of diffidence and, sometimes, of hostility, by Dominicans towards Hai-tian people, seems somehow reinforced and perpetuated by the kind of language used in history school books[10]. The role of education in working for peace, facilitating integra-tion and overcoming discrimination towards ethnic diversity appears, here, disregarded. School's role for peace education seems even more important to compensate media's role in raising alerts, reinforcing stereotypes against Haitian people.

With regard to gender and education, national investigations indicate, furthermore, that education level has a significant impact on becoming an adolescent mother, as to a lower education level of the girl or of her parents or agents of care corresponds a higher probability of an early pregnancy (Oficina Nacional de Estadística, May 2008). This kind of event perpetuates the poverty cycle among poor families, seriously impacting on health, due to the high rates of morbidity and motherly-infantile mortality of a delivery in ear-ly years. Maternity is a relevant factor for school abandonment, among adolescent girls, who focus, then, on childcare and domestic work. Further, being the reproductive health and sexuality issues only included in higher grades of formal education curricula, rural girls and those belonging to poorer socio-economic environments are not provided with these fundamental life-skills, because they attend only basic grades of formal education or receive no education at all.

Concerning inclusive quality education for all, children from the Dominican élite access to private expensive international schools, preparing them for international envi-ronments and opportunities. Afterwards, several students enroll in the United States uni-versity system, coming back, later, "full of competences", to take their place within the local dominant group. A large part of children and adolescents access to often decaying, few organized public schools with unskilled and low-paid teachers. Parents need to pay at least children's school uniforms and part of the books. Some slightly better equipped schools also require a minimum enrollment fee. These schools are, often, overcrowded and students attend classes in different shifts, during the day. This also feeds the cultural gap between the élite and the rest of local people, revealing asymmetries, by the use of culture, as a form of power.

Interviewed local people show a lack of trust towards school institutions and not so much expectations about school outcomes. Students, and their parents, too, know that, for the hard they can study, they will never receive an equal education, as the students of the élite[11] and that it will not be enough to guarantee them same access and opportunities for a better future: *Even where children have access to school, a poor quality of education can contribute to disaffection* (UNESCO-UNICEF, 2007, p. 12). It can be interesting to refer to Ogbu's studies on school outcomes with voluntary minorities (immigrants) and non-voluntary minorities (Afro-Americans), in the United States of America (Ogbu, 1999). The first group, arrived by a migration project, positively evaluated the benefits of the new school system, in comparison to school in origin country. Students and families of the

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[10] For example: *If we, today, have the independence, we owe it to men and women, who on 27 February 1844, decided to separate us from the Haitians,* in Hernández R, Hernández Grullón A., *Ciencias Sociales 6, 2° Ciclo Educación Básica*, ed. Actualidad Escolar, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, 2000. Reference translated by Alice Binazzi.

[11] *Ibidem*.

second group, although understanding education's relevance, had fewer expectations and commitment, as they considered having access to less qualified schools, than the dominant group. Therefore, we can here reaffirm that the access to a quality and rights-based education for all is fundamental to respond to the basic needs of local people, especially of those marginalized children and adolescents, living at-risk of violence and exploitation.

While prevention and protection are essential for children's maximum survival and development, according to the Art.6 UNCRC guiding principle, quality of education contents should also provide them with higher level of contents to build their future. The Human Rights Council of the United Nations clearly states that equitable and sustainable investment in children can compensate and provide same opportunities for survival and development, while

Inadequate investment, especially in the most vulnerable and marginalized, can perpetuate the intergenerational transmission of poverty and inequality, leading to irreversible negative impact on children's development. (U.N. General Assembly Human Rights Council, 2014)

3.2 Non-formal education actions by local organizations and children's participation

In this complex landscape, local organizations working for children's rights offer some alternative of non-formal education, trying to compensate the previously highlighted school gaps of formal education. The particular strength of these organizations consists in their deep-rooted knowledge of local area/territory, of the shared cultural meanings by the local community, as well as about society internal contradictions. In this sense, we remind that a culture, intended as a flow of meanings, is never homogeneous, but it can shows differences and contradictions inside itself (Hannerz, 1992; 1996). This is relevant to policy and planning activity. The charismatic force of certain local organizations derives from their locally acknowledged competence and concrete action to fill the gap of institutions' absence, in a particular territory, due their distance, from local community meanings, generating widespread luck of trust.

Among some valuable local experiences of children's participation, it is worth to mention *Caminante,* a local organization in Boca Chica, working for children's rights. Its work develops by the methodology of the so-called *agentes multiplicadores*, who are young people, who, themselves, had difficult life experiences, during their childhood or adolescence. These young people, after a successful personal recovery path and an appropriate training as social workers, are now capable and deeply motivated to assist marginalised children and adolescents. *Caminante*, by working with these *agentes multiplicadores*, can be closer to children's meanings to better understand their difficulties. Children can feel more comfortable to talk with young people, who, in addition, could experience similar situations, like them. *Caminante* intervenes on prevention and on identifying eventual cases of abuses, maltreatments or exploitation of children also by the organization of summer camps, during school holidays. Summer camps develop on a daily basis, offering meals and some classes and homework support. Information on reproductive health is also provided, as well as, rights-based contents by games and talks on issues of interest for children and adolescents. At the end of summer camps, a participatory process of follow-up takes place, together with all participant children and *agen-*

tes multiplicadores, to listen to strong and weak points identified by them, in order to improve future camps.

It is worth to mention a relevant past event for local community sensitization, about sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in travel and tourism, which registered a strong children's participation[12], organized by *Caminante,* in 2006. It was a *paseo*, a children's walk along the main streets of Boca Chica and in front of beach bars and discos, main spots of sexual exploitation of adolescents and young girls. Children were showing signs with "their prices" in local *pesos,* some of them wearing white long clothes and masks, as little phantasms and "invisible" victims of this phenomenon. An adult, heading the walk and wearing a shark mask, representing sexual exploitation, also emphasized the symbolism of this walk. This action was addressed to impact on community culture of tolerance, towards marginalization and violence against children and adolescents.

Another important initiative in providing non-formal education is offered, by the *Centro Juvenil* of the *Fundación Educativa Acción Callejera,* in the town of Santiago, additional field site of the field research at the base of this work. This Centre is a building next to the city park, where children work, as shoeshine boys. It is open daytime, available for them to rest in quiet rooms or to attend classes of writing, art creations and music. Here, children can safely deposit their shoeshine boxes, at the end of the day, coming back to pick them up, next morning, being offered a breakfast. Interviewed working children of the park were particularly happy to be allowed to play in the Centre's basketball court, having a shower and a lunch. The Centre also provides medical and psychological help and it is working to extend this service to the local community, in the purpose of advocating for children's rights, too. While trying to protect and to recuperate children from child labour on the street, this organization also provides life-skills and non-formal education.

4. Conclusions

In the studied context, to overcome inequality and violence against children and adolescents, achieving their real empowerment, the role of formal and non-formal education is of utmost importance. It is, here, important to recall that, after the conclusion of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a new Sustainable Development Agenda was approved by the U. N. General Assembly, in 2015. The new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), at Goal nr.4.1, foresee:

To ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.

Beyond the rhetoric, human rights and, in this case, human rights of children should be more strongly presented, as legally-binding commitments for State Parties, having ratified the related international legal standards. This should be done in the purpose of underlying governments' responsibility and accountability for implementation. In the field spot of this research, valuable actions of a few local foundations and associations, offering non-formal education to compensate the gaps of formal one, are seriously limited,

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[12] Here, we refer to the UNCRC guiding-principle of children's participation, as stated at Art. 12.

by scarce economic and human resources and by the challenge of effectively reaching all children in need of help. These kind of initiatives are scarcely supported by central institutions, although, these local organizations are highly considered, by the authorities, for their fundamental consultative role in non-formal education, prevention, child protection and safeguard of children's rights. Moreover, their work is acknowledged, for being central, in community education, sensitization and advocacy. However, they often act on a voluntary basis, facing difficult phases of project interruptions and fragmentation, while awaiting for some new resources, to go on in their activities. In this sense, we can affirm that the financial constrains seriously affect aid effectiveness.

In contexts, where children are at risk of violence and discrimination, like the studied one, the challenge would be, in particular, to establish a dialogue between non-formal education, provided by deep-rooted local organizations, and formal education system that should seriously review its curricula contents. This synergy, able to provide a rights-based education and to overcome the community culture of tolerance towards violence, should rely on institutional policies and economical support. New contents for rights-based education should be welcome in school curricula, strongly oriented to equity, non-discrimination and peace. A cooperation of this kind would be determinant to change children's future in the Dominican Republic, like elsewhere in the world, where similar challenges, in children's issues, are tackled.

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