Learning (in) the Environment: Self-Education Among Haiti’s Marginalized Children

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In many postcolonial societies, such as Haiti, access to quality schooling remains difficult, especially for the thousands of disadvantaged children and youth who are living fully or partially on the streets or as domestic servants. I have been engaged in ethnographic work with these children in an effort to understand their experiences and perspectives in the context of the aid-based Haitian state, where childhood is a key arena for foreign intervention, representation, and narration. This research has involved multiple site visits over a period of 15 years to four different regions in Southern Haiti. Working alone or on occasion with both Haitian and US student research assistants, I have conducted individual and group formal and informal interviews with approximately 80 disadvantaged children and youths, ranging in age from 6 to 21, who were engaged in domestic service and/or street work. I have done ethnographic observations in diverse settings, such as NGO- and faith-based outreach programs, schools serving children in domestic service, as well as in places in the community frequented by children as they collected water, worked at beach bars (collecting money or food from customers), or spent time observing adults in various activities. My research has also been informed by about a year living among families who hosted children in domestic service, as well as by interviews and discussions with parents/caretakers and teachers who worked with disadvantaged children or who grew up themselves under conditions of disadvantage.¹

There is a large body of research that critiques the role of thousands of Northern churches, faith-based organizations, and NGOs in making Haiti into a "Republic of NGOs" – one of the most foreign-aid-dependent countries in the world (Johnston 2024, Kristoff and Panarelli 2010, Maguire and Freeman 2017, Schuller 2016). Efforts to “save” children and families and reform childhood experience according to global/Northern standards of child protection and well-being have been predicated on a longstanding discourse not only of political and economic insufficiency but of Haitian cultural deficiency as well (Hoffman 2024). In this optic, discussions of education have almost always been reduced to discussions of schooling, with the result that strong traditions of informal learning and spirituality that are central to Haitian cultural practice, history, and identity, and to the experience of childhood have either been denigrated as anti-progressive or effectively erased from view, for both Haitians and foreigners.

Yet, as I spent time with children, I saw the contrary: that Haitian childhood is centrally focused on a kind of self-education that exists and perhaps even thrives under conditions of fugitivity, outside of formal institutional arrangements, where it draws from wellsprings of collective cultural identity and spirituality that go largely unrecognized in a society shaped by the legacies of colonialism. This self-education draws from notions of selfhood as co-extensive with collective
social relational worlds and with the spiritual, natural and built world. Based in an ecological framework characterized by a profound sense of connection, enmeshment, or entangling of the person and the material, natural, and spiritual environment, children's learning was rooted in forms of sensory engagement with their surroundings in ways that went far beyond a classic view of "learning as cognition" to learning as a form of somatic and sensory engagement with the world. This sensory order, as Geurts (2003) observes, deeply shapes children's learning in distinctive ways related to indigenous understandings of self and person. In the Haitian case, it draws on children's "relational epistemologies" (Bang, et al. 2015, 304) with their environments to enable learning under conditions that largely exclude them from institutional spaces of learning, such as schools.

Coming to this view of learning was challenging, but I had excellent teachers – the children themselves, who patiently instructed me about their lives and led me through their neighborhoods. Over time, I myself began to experience powerful synergies between the physical, emotional, and mental dimensions of being in Haiti: as unspoken desires and thoughts became reality, mind and material seemed to merge, and the senses became avenues for powerful forms of perception and understanding. In children’s peer groups, as they moved around their neighborhoods, or in situations where children were working alongside adults, such as street-side car repair, I could observe how attention itself took a different form from normative expectations in the US: it was distributed, sequential, and attuned widely to the environment rather than narrowly to a specific object or task, reflecting the idea of "open attention" described by researchers among indigenous Mayan communities (Gaskins and Paradise 2010). Children mediated meaning from their environment through their bodies, as when touching a word in a text and then one’s forehead could transfer meaning from the text to the mind. On walks through their neighborhoods, children displayed rich knowledge of the interconnected material and spiritual dimensions of their environments, showing me a variety of plants that could be used for healing as well as those that had dangerous power to cause physical or spiritual harm. A young girl, for example, taught me that pigeons could “give” their blood for you if you were sick. By not saying “we use their blood” or “we take their blood” she also taught me about the agency of the natural world in relation to their own: pigeons give their blood to heal us.

In their households, children experienced a rich array of occasions for acquiring skills and competencies that could support their identities in spite of their social marginalization. Children (sometimes as young as two or three) are commonly sent to and raised in non-natal households in the hope that the receiving household will take care of the child and provide schooling in exchange for the child's help at home. Even when schooling is not provided (as can be the case), the expectation is that the child will experience fomasyon (training), a culturally widespread notion that captures both the learning of skills as well as the acquisition of valued qualities of personhood such as endurance, self-sacrifice, and ability to care for others, all of which children are thought to develop as they adapt to and learn the ways of their new households. Children were proud of their expertise in being excellent caretakers and cooks, for example. As a young girl told me, "I know how to do laundry very well."
Beyond households, everyday life was rich with occasions for learning. Vehicle mechanics working in a street-side space, for example, had an audience of children who would come by and observe, often for long periods and with great fascination. A broken bicycle in the street drew a crowd of children who intently observed the repair process. Groups of children would closely observe traditional religious ceremonies, standing outside the action taking place within the ceremonial area. Every community had church groups, clubs, and informal groups where community service and learning were intertwined and in which "auto-education," as one youth told me, was a key element.

In these fugitive spaces of self-education, learning had a number of characteristics. First (and in contrast to schooling), it occurred in mixed-age peer groups outside the direction or supervision of adults. Second, it was grounded in social interactions where children who were more skilled or knowledgeable interacted with those who were less skilled or knowledgeable, serving as models. Children appeared to be self-motivated, taking initiative on their own to participate. On occasions where a learner did not yet have the skills to perform an activity, a coach – preferably someone of similar age but with marginally more knowledge or experience – offered the learner encouragement and support. There was almost never any didactic instruction on the part of either models or coaches. Third, observation was a key modality of learning, and there was nearly always a dialogical relationship between observation and performance. As one child performed, the others observed, and the performance role was distributed or passed to different individuals in succession. Finally, children's learning was highly embodied and multimodal. It was mediated through physical movement, utilization of materials, gesture, and the senses, including sight, sound, taste, and touch (see Hoffman 2023, for further discussion).

This approach to learning reflects the indigenous spiritual traditions of Haitian Vodou, in which the body is considered the primary locus of learning and knowledge (Michel 1996, Landry 2008), reflecting the idea that people in different cultures have entirely different sensory modalities of knowing the world (Geurts 2003, Howes and Classen 2014, Stoller 2010). I saw that, from the children’s perspective, their environment was a dynamic space in which the physical and spiritual, corporeal and moral, social and individual, human and not-human were all experienced through the senses as interconnected domains for learning.

As Leigh Patel (2019) observes, even when it has been forbidden, foreclosed, and seemingly withered through colonialism, learning is always protected and maintained in spaces of fugitivity. Though excluded from schooling and from familial support, disadvantaged Haitian children can be said to be engaged in fugitive learning, where their personhood can be developed and maintained in spite of the social and institutional forces bent on erasing it.

Certainly, my argument should not be construed as anti-schooling or as a denial of the often harsh conditions that many children suffer that pose threats to their well-being. At the same time, it is critically important to recognize the ways Northern and global visions of childhood and learning often function to obscure or misrepresent indigenous traditions that sustain learning under
conditions of fugitivity and that could, if properly recognized, serve as important resources for the reform of classroom-based learning. As the Haitian case shows, even in the absence of schooling, neither the learning nor the aspirations for becoming persons disappeared, and children built on their experiences in alternative spaces to learn and educate themselves toward personhood and hoped-for futures.

References


Author Biography

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1 For a more complete discussion of this research and its cultural and social context, please see Hoffman (2024).

2 A discussion of the relationship between the "natural" and "built" environment would entail a much lengthier explanation of Haitian epistemology and spirituality than is possible here. In short, in Haiti, the distinction between "natural" and "built" is less clear and less culturally marked, as in Vodou both embody spiritual meaning and value and such meaning can move from one form to another--e.g. meaning can be transferred from a material/built object to the natural world and vice-versa very readily. Thus, they are all, in a sense, interconnected within the same "environment."

3 The practice of sending children to other households is sometimes known in Haitian Creole as "restavek" ("stay-with") --a derogative term. However, this is a socially complex and ill-defined practice and not all children sent to live elsewhere are considered "restavek." Fomasyon is not limited in age; both young children as well as adults can undergo “training” of various types. It should also be noted that growing up in another household is not just about labor or learning; it can lead to valued emotional attachments and informal adoption as children remain in their "host" families through adulthood.