Home alone
Sibling caretakers in León, Nicaragua

Kjerstin Dahlblom
Original papers

The thesis is based on the following papers:

Paper I
Dahlblom K, Herrera A, Peña R, Dahlgren L.
Home alone: children as caretakers in León, Nicaragua.
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(accessed 2008-09-19)

Paper II
Dahlblom K, Herrera Rodríguez A, Peña R, Dahlgren L.
“Everyone should help in their own house, because if they don’t, who will?”:
Sibling caretakers’ experiences in León, Nicaragua.
Childhoods, under review.

Paper III
Dahlblom K. Estrella: a gifted narrative.
Childhoods Today, under review.

Paper IV
Dahlblom K, Stenlund H, Dahlgren L, Meléndez, M, Herrera A, Peña R.
"Mind the gap" – Schooling gaps among children in León, Nicaragua.
Submitted manuscript.

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Abstract

Sibling caretaking, although common across time and cultures, has not been well researched from the carer’s point of view. In Nicaragua, ranked as one of the poorest countries in the Americas, sibling caretaking is common. The country’s historical background and its state of chronic poverty, widespread unemployment, loose family structures, and migration and mobility makes of the old practise of shared management child care a necessity. Households headed by single mothers constitute a particular Nicaraguan characteristic. Many children are expected to help in their own families and care for their siblings and other children living in their households. In its broadest sense sibling caretaking is a public health concern, and we conducted this study to widen the understanding of the phenomenon as it is represented in a setting undergoing a rapid social transition.

The main objectives were to identify, describe and analyse the life situation of sibling caretakers in poor areas in León, Nicaragua, with focus on how they perceived it themselves. A combined qualitative and quantitative methodological design was used, mainly applying an ethnographic approach. A further ambition was to explore involvement of children in a participatory research process in accordance with the ‘Convention on the Rights of the Child’.

The overall emotion expressed among the caretakers was pride, even if their situation often was characterized by stress and coping problems. They perceived their work as important for their families and they appreciated to fend for their siblings. Household work and nurturing of siblings were shaping the future lives of the caretakers and constituted part of their socialization.

Even if many of these children achieve essential life skills as caretakers, they are at risk of falling behind as they grow older. Their long-term personal development is likely to be hampered by the obligations they have as caretakers. The carers’ awareness of missing out on education was the most problematic issue for them.

From a societal point of view, caretaking has negative consequences. The individual child is marginalised with limited access to basic education, contributing to overall low educational levels in Nicaragua.

While the structuring conditions leading to sibling caretaking may be difficult to change, awareness of how these can affect children might make way for improvements in terms of access to school education and support from the society. The knowledge gained from this study should be further utilised to plan for interventions that take children's perspectives into consideration.

**Key words**: sibling caretakers, life skills, school absenteeism, ethnographic approach, children's participation, children's rights, developing country, Nicaragua
Resumen

‘Solos en casa’: hermanos cuidadores en León, Nicaragua

Este presente estudio está focalizado en los niños (as) entre 6-17 años que cuidan en casa de sus hermanos menores en el Municipio de León, Nicaragua. El hecho de que las familias pobres, frecuentemente, tengan que depender de sus hijos mayores cuidando a los menores, para que los padres puedan trabajar, se considera actualmente un problema de Salud Pública. Los objetivos del estudio fueron el identificar, describir y analizar las propias percepciones que niños(as) cuidadores tienen sobre esta situación (el ser cuidadores) que permitiera contribuir a mejorar las condiciones de vida de los mismos. Se utilizaron e implementaron diversos abordajes metodológicos de investigación-acción-participativa, ajustados a grupos específicos de niños (as) así como a su entorno. Los conocimientos y las experiencias organizativas –metodológicas obtenidas a través de esta investigación servirán de base o plataforma para construir, planificar y desarrollar futuros proyectos y/o acciones de intervención dirigidas a éstas poblaciones de riesgo.

Artículo 1

Solos en casa: niños cuidadores en León, Nicaragua

Dahlgren K, Herrera A, Peña R, Dahlgren L

Este artículo explora y analiza las condiciones de vida de los niños (as) cuidadores de las áreas pobres del Municipio de León, Nicaragua. Las actividades diarias desarrolladas por estos niños (as) cuidadores se estudiaron a través de observaciones participativas y entrevistas en profundidad con niños (as) cuidadores, informantes claves y padres. Los propios niños se sentían satisfechos y orgullosos de que se confiara en ellos como cuidadores y se sentían útiles al contribuir en la subsistencia de sus familias. Sin embargo, siguiendo la perspectiva del curso de la vida, el papel de cuidador implica una disminución de opciones en la vida. Desde temprano aparentan obtener habilidades vitales esenciales pero a medida que crecen, muchos corren el riesgo de quedarse atrás debido a su situación marginal y a su falta de educación básica.

Palabras clave: hermanos cuidadores, experiencias de niños (as), pobreza, Nicaragua
“Todo el mundo debería ayudar en su propia casa porque si no, ¿quién lo va a hacer?” Experiencias de hermanos cuidadores en León, Nicaragua

Dahlblom K, Herrera Rodríguez A, Peña R, Dahlgren L

El foco del estudio son los propios niños (as) cuidadores. El objetivo es el explorar cómo estos niños(as) perciben su propia condición de cuidadores. Metodológicamente, el diseño del estudio etnográfico se diversificó para incluir un grupo selecto de nueve cuidadores en el proceso de investigación. Se aplicaron diferentes técnicas en la recopilación de información: discusiones de grupos en etapas múltiples, entrevistas individuales, narrativas escritas cortas, fotos auto dirigidas y dibujos.

A pesar de una situación compleja y estresante para los cuidadores donde la combinación de tareas era percibida como difícil de manejar, el descubrimiento más sorprendente fue su sentimiento dominante de orgullo. Se sentían orgullosos al poder proveer para sus hermanos pero a la vez estaban atrapados en las exigencias de sus familias y se quejaban de perder su posibilidad de recibir una educación.

**Palabras clave:** hermanos (as) cuidadores, etnografía, Nicaragua, orgullo
Artículo 3

**Estrella: una narrativa talentosa**

Dahlblom K

Este documento analiza una historia corta escrita por una joven Nicaragüense quien narra su experiencia al cuidar de su sobrina. Ella describe un punto de momento crucial en su vida y se utilizó el análisis narrativo para interpretar el significado de su historia. La importancia y las implicaciones de convertirse en madre son elementos claves de su historia.

Su contribución formó parte de un estudio más grande acerca de cuidadores de hermanos que se llevó a cabo en León, Nicaragua, donde se utilizaron múltiples herramientas para explorar el fenómeno.

**Palabras clave:** cuidadores de hermanos (as), Nicaragua, análisis narrativo, maternidad

Artículo 4

**‘Preocupación por la brecha’- La brecha escolar en niños (as) en León, Nicaragua**

Dahlblom K, Stenlund H, Dahlgren L, Meléndez M, Herrera A, Peña R

**Objetivos:** Analizar patrones de ausencia escolar entre niños de León, Nicaragua, e identificar factores asociados con la presencia de brechas educativas.

**Métodos:** Una muestra aleatoria estratificada de 370 niños en grupos de edades de 6 a 16 años fue seleccionada del Sistema de Vigilancia Demográfica y de Salud de León, Nicaragua. La información que se recolectó fue sobre la edad de la matrícula escolar inicial, la asistencia, repetición y la deserción escolar de estos niños(as).

**Resultados:** Cincuenta y siete niños (15.4%) no asistían a la escuela, el 17.0% eran niños comparado con el 13.3% de niñas. De esos asistiendo a la escuela 32.3% no estaban en el nivel correspondiente a su edad, y el 45.4% comenzó a los 6 años de edad. Se empezaron a quedar atrás en el segundo grado y el número de repetidores iba en aumento a medida que aumentaba el grado. De acuerdo con esto, cada grado tenía niños de varias edades. Entre los niños de 16 años que asistían a la escuela, 76.5%, iban retrasados, 37.6% niños vs. 25.8% niñas. El análisis de regresión logística demostró un riesgo más alto para la existencia de lagunas educativas entre varones y que la pobreza era el factor único más importante para tener brechas educativas.

**Conclusiones:** Matricular a niños a partir de la edad de 7 años en el primer grado podría reducir el número de repetidores y cambiar el patrón prevalente de niños que empiezan y dejan la escuela a lo largo de todos los grados. Las autoridades escolares y sanitarias deberían unir sus esfuerzos y ofrecer programas localizados en la escuela para la promoción de servicios de apoyo social tales como almuerzos gratuitos, para facilitar que las familias con menos posibilidades les ofrezcan a sus hijos una educación completa.

**Palabras clave:** brechas educativas, niños (as), educación, países en vías de desarrollo, pobreza, Nicaragua.
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<tr>
<td>CCAN</td>
<td>Comisión Coordinadora de la Niñez y la Adolescencia</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIDS</td>
<td>Centre for Demographic and Health Research, León University</td>
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<tr>
<td>CISAS</td>
<td>Centro de Información y Servicios de Accesoria en Salud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPRC</td>
<td>The Chronic Poverty Research Centre (An international partnerships of universities, research institutes and NGOs based in University of Manchester, UK)</td>
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<td>CRIN</td>
<td>The Child Rights Information Network</td>
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<td>HDSS-León</td>
<td>Health and Demographic Surveillance System in León</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non Governmental Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sida/SAREC</td>
<td>The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency/Department for Research Cooperation</td>
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Appendix I-IV and photos from León
Papers I-IV
'Home alone'?

'Why does your mother go to work and leave you all alone?'

'Because if she doesn’t go, we will die. If she doesn’t go we don’t get anything to eat.'

Girl, 13 years

The title of this thesis alludes to a children’s movie with the same title. The plot is about an 8-year old boy in the US who is accidentally left at home alone when his family goes for a Christmas holiday to Europe. He is a daring and capable boy, managing burglars and sorting out all kinds of trouble all by himself.

In Nicaragua the concept ‘home alone’ takes on quite a different meaning, and ever since my first visit to León, I have been intrigued by the particular reality it presents to the many children in charge of their siblings, alone in their homes, far away from public spaces. They too, need to be daring and capable, but not for the same reasons as will be illuminated in this thesis.

Yet one of my strongest first impressions of Nicaragua was the presence of children of all ages everywhere at any time of day or night. Once on a cold February day at home in Umeå an astonished Nicaraguan boy of 12 years on a visit asked me: ‘Where are the children?’ I explained to him that: ‘in Sweden, the kids are at pre-school, in school, in after-school centres or at home with their parents, but you won’t find them out in the streets on their own. And for sure, they are not home alone’.

In Nicaragua some describe me as a ‘chela’ (‘blonde’) who grew up in an increasingly affluent society where the social security system provides for children and their families, someone who never had been exposed to the horrors of war and someone ill prepared to be confronted by the abject poverty in Nicaragua. But behind these obvious differences in background, I found that I could easily relate to the Nicaraguan reality of ‘home alone’. My siblings and I grew up with a single mother and we have our own experiences of being ‘home alone’ while our mother was working, which was quite unusual at the time.

There was a very strong movement in Sweden to support the people of Nicaragua during the 1980s. The solidarity with small countries struggling for independence such as Vietnam and Chile was very strong, and it was easy for me to identify with the Nicaraguan cause. Nicaragua has received ongoing support from Sweden since the 1979 Sandinista revolution. A number of Swedish development cooperation organisations and NGOs work in Nicaragua, and typically, on my first visit to Nicaragua we brought fund-raised money for a children’s library and day-care centre.

Sida’s website informs: ‘Research cooperation began on a small scale in the early 1980s, and has helped Nicaragua build its skills in fields such as health, environment, natural resources and technology. Postgraduate students have also been given the opportunity to pursue some of their studies at Swedish universities’ (http://www.sida.se). Our department was one of the first to engage in this research cooperation and
from 1988 onwards the collaboration increased year by year. Although I started out as an administrator in the project, the research team encouraged me when I decided to shift and become researcher. My background in social sciences and a degree as primary school teacher made the choice of topic easy for me. As my project now is coming to a close, so is the Swedish Sida/SAREC bilateral research support. The consequences in Nicaragua of the phase out of the support remain to be seen, but regardless, I sincerely hope that we can maintain this long-standing collaboration in one way or another.

**Outline of the thesis**

'*Organising is what you do before you do something, so that when you do it, it is not all mixed up*. A.A. Milne.

This thesis is structured in the following way: I begin by situating the phenomenon of sibling caretaking across time and cultures, and go on to discuss and the concept of childhood, the role of children’s work and the rationale of including children in research. In the following section ‘Land of Lakes and Volcanoes,’ I draw a historical background of the structural conditions shaping the everyday lives of sibling caretakers in Nicaragua and León.

After presenting the aims of the study, I give a brief overview of the papers included in the thesis. A thorough description of the *Research process and methods* is done to give the reader a chance to evaluate the trustworthiness of the findings and to follow the arguments and reasoning of the discussion. Analyses and ethical considerations are discussed in *Research process and methods*, together with a presentation of my chosen combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Limitations of the study and methodological considerations are presented in the *Discussion*.

I have merged the findings into themes to give a more complete picture of the results. To guide the reader I have indicated which paper is referred to in the text. A quantitative approach was applied in Paper IV, while the three first papers are using an ethnographic approach. After a concluding section, I finalise the thesis by suggesting implications for future research.

In qualitative research transparency is considered to ensure rigour and give the reader a possibility to assess the validity of the analysis. Throughout the cover story I have inserted my own reflections and observations, as a way to show the potential impact of my own presence and describe my own role in the project. I wanted to make visible my pre-understanding and interpretations of the setting and its context.
Setting the scene

Situating sibling caretaking

The interchangeable terms ‘sibling caretaking’ or ‘child caretaking’ was put forward by Weisner and Gallimore in 1977 to distinguish styles of caretaking and to differentiate these from parental caretaking. They define the terms as:

‘all kinds of socialization, training, and routine responsibilities one child assumes for others. “Caring” refers to activities ranging from complete and independent full-time care of a child by an older child to the performance of specific tasks for another child under the supervision of adults or other children; it includes verbal or other explicit training and direction of the child’s behaviour, as well as simply “keeping an eye out for younger siblings.”’ (Weisner and Gallimore, 1977)

Since time immemorial children have been engaged in caring for their younger siblings and carrying out various domestic tasks in their homes. There is evidence from prehistoric civilisations, such as the people of Brú na Bóinne in Ireland who lived about 6000 years ago, that children were having to fend for themselves. At the place of their settlement, in the Newgrange Visiting Centre, an exhibition shows the daily activities of children while the adults were building a passage tomb. “Looking after the littl e ones” appears as one of the central depictions on the painted wall frieze.

In ethnography, accounts of sibling caretaking confirm that children are by far the most common carers. Already at the age of five, many children are involved in caring for their younger siblings. Throughout middle childhood (7-12 years old) caretaking is common. In this period children develop as independent caregivers, and are expected to be capable of carrying out household work and caretaking on their own (Mann, 2001, Schildkrot, 1978) (Zukow, 1989). Multiple child rearing practices are predominant across cultures, except for the contemporary Western world where mothers are seen as the primary caretakers of infants and children.

Perhaps the most well-known description of sibling caretaking is provided by Margaret Mead in her fieldwork expedition to Samoa in the 1920s (Mead, (1928) 2001). Her study aimed to compare gender roles amongst adolescent girls. She set out to explore whether the problematic period of adolescence experienced in the American society was universal, of human nature, or if it was due to cultural traits. After 9 months in Samoa, spending most of her time with the young girls in the community, she concluded that gender is culturally constructed. At that time this was a new way of thinking and her findings challenged the general view that gender was shaped by biology. In this context she also describes in detail the everyday lives of little girls. She reported that:
The chief nurse-maid is usually a child of six or seven who is not strong enough to lift a baby over six months old, but who can carry the child straddling on the left hip, or on the small of the back…'

‘…in the case of the little girls all of these (household) tasks are merely supplementary to the main business of baby-tending. Very small boys also have some care of the younger children, but at eight or nine years of age they are usually relieved of it.’ (Mead, (1928) 2001).

The girls were held responsible by their mothers if the little ones were misbehaving. This led to a care-giving pattern where the caretakers yielded to the sibling’s threat of making a scene and tried every way to avoid an outcry. The power balance among the children was kept stable by assigning the responsibility for a still younger child to the one who enjoyed the care from the older child (Mead, (1928) 2001).

Wolcott (1967) reports in another ethnographic study, that small children were usually left in the care of an older sibling. Wolcott worked as a teacher in a tiny Indian village along the north-west coast of Canada and was at the same time doing his case study of village life and school. A quote from one of his pupils, Walter, 12 years, illustrates what Wolcott considers ‘…the casual nature of caring for a baby:

"We got up at 6:00 o’clock this morning so I put the stove on and it was hot so I put some milk in the bottle so I give it to the baby".

Wolcott continues: ‘The immediate world of every village child includes relations of all ages from siblings near his own age to parents, grandparents, and sometimes great grandparents.’ (Wolcott, (1967) 2003)

These two examples reflect the findings from a study by Barry and Paxon in 1971. They coded and rated measures of infancy and childhood in a world sample of 186 societies representing differentiated cultural areas (Barry and Paxon, 1971). Based on the compiled detailed ethnographic information, they concluded that mothers were not the principal caretakers or companions of young children in the majority of these societies.

Even if sibling caretaking is demonstrably widespread and is mentioned in various ethnographic studies (Schildkrout, 1978, Weisner and Gallimore, 1977, Zukow, 1989), the phenomenon as such has not been well researched from the caretaker’s point of view. Weisner and Gallimore were concerned that although non-parental caretaking is the norm in most societies, socialization theory did not take this into account. Child caretaking was virtually unknown in psychology and largely limited to ethnographic reports (Weisner and Gallimore, 1977). They argued that the responsibilities for care could only be understood in the context of the home setting, and the methods of ethnography were therefore best suited for studying sibling caretaking.
Since then research on children’s issues has changed dramatically, especially after the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989). Children are seen as social actors and competent interpreters of their social worlds (James, 2001, Emond, 2005, Woodhead, 2007). Still, research on the phenomenon of sibling caretakers is limited (Punch, 2007, Morrongiello and Bradley, 1997, Morrongiello et al., 2007) perhaps because the focus of the current debate has been on issues of child work, street children, violence and trafficking. A shift towards more research on sibling caretakers in the Third World is now seen, in part as a consequence of the many victims of the HIV/ADIS pandemic. For example, the Unicef web-page devotes special attention to child-headed households, predominantly found in Southern Africa, and CRIN presents on their webpage research and action on ‘Children without parental care’. The children in our study were not orphans, but they were in a similar situation.

Child work and the concept of childhood

Childhood is a social construction. The notion of childhood is related to its social and cultural context and when comparing childhoods across the globe descriptions and interpretations differs considerable. The United Nations Convention of the Rights on the Child (UNCRC) establishes that a child ‘means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to child, majority is attained earlier’ (UN, 1989). The term childhood is gender-blind and it tends to hide the reality that it differs if you are a boy or a girl (Rubenson, 2005). Gender is also a social construction, resulting in different roles for men and women. This influences the ways in which rights are interpreted and implemented for boys and girls.

In Nicaragua the concept of child is divided, so that those individuals who are under the age of 13 are defined as children and those between 13 and 18 years of age as adolescents (UN, 1999). According to WHO, adolescents are those aged 10 to 19 years (www.WHO.org). In this thesis I use child as defined in the UNCRC, but sometimes I use adolescents or young people when discussing those caretakers who are more than 13 years old.

Legislation against child labour has been on the agenda since the introduction of the UNCRC. Two different standpoints are often seen; to abolish or to regulate child work. Those advocating regulation of work argue that in most low income countries children contribute to their families’ livelihood with their work and as long as poverty and inequalities prevail it is not possible to prevent children from working, except for those engaged in very dangerous jobs (Green, 1998).
It is common for children to work in Nicaragua. A report on domestic work among children compiled by several NGOs and International Labour Organization showed that 18% of children in the age groups 5 to 17 years are engaged in some form of work (Table 1).

Table 1. Magnitude of children’s work in Nicaragua (IPEC, 2002)

- 18% (appr. 314,000) of all children between 5 to 17 years in Nicaragua are working, in León appr. 20,000
- 44% of those working are between 15-17 years
- 42% are between 10-14 years
- 14% are between 5 and 9 years
- Most children are engaged within the agricultural sector (53%) and in the informal sector, for example selling in the streets, working in the markets or in the manufacturing industries.
- Of these, only 60% receives salary for their work, the remaining children work for their families without remuneration.
- The majority of working children do not attend school (52%), contributing to the statistics that Nicaragua is having the highest rate of school-drop out in the whole region.

From the report with the title: ‘Children’s domestic work in Nicaragua: “I’m turning 14, and I wash, I cook, I clean, I take care of children...”’

In Nicaragua the minimum age to work is 14 years. In our study most of the caretakers had been working since they were at least nine years old. Although work in the home cannot be labelled ‘hazardous’, as compared to the work in the garbage dump, it still may have some harmful implications. A study performed on household chores and child health, did not show any negative effect on children’s health. The authors point out that it was it was difficult to find measurements showing the nature of the health-chores link. They suggest these issues should be further researched (Francavilla and Lyon, 2003).

Research with children

Public health research often aims at involving people, and to bring about change introducing prevention programmes in close collaboration with different actors in society. The participatory action approach has been preferred in, for example, research on domestic violence (Ellsberg et al., 2001) as a way to empower women to act against prevailing norms of men’s superiority.

However, in issues concerning children the research and interventions have mostly been directed towards adult caregivers, usually mothers, as they are thought to be the main responsible for children’s health and development.
As shown in the section ‘Setting the scene’ it is common with shared management of care in most societies, and children are also actively involved in caretaking together with adults.

In the Nicaraguan setting a number of NGOs have been precursors in involving children in research, mostly in issues concerning child work. In his research on cross-cultural perspectives on working children, Liebel strongly advocates the right for children to assert a will of their own. He suggests participatory action research to be a suitable method when trying to involve children in research (Liebel, 2004, Liebel, 2001). This approach was used as a guide when designing our study, since his experiences were derived from a setting similar to León.

When this thesis project was launched in 1999, research together with children was rare, at least in the area of Public Health. In England, the research with children has increased rapidly since the 1990s, and at time of writing this thesis, centres devoting their research to and with children are found in several universities. Child focused methods and topics suitable for research with children have been developed and this area of research is now strengthened across the globe (Fraser and Open University, 2004, Greene and Hogan, 2004, Greig et al., 2007, Holmes, 1998, Hungerland, 2007, Kellett, 2005, Shier, 2001).
Key facts about Nicaragua¹

Demographic indicators 2006
Area: 130,000 km²
Capital: Managua (around 1 million inhab.)
Population: 5.6 millions
Population annual growth rate (%): 2.0
Urban population (%): 59.4
GNP per capita: 1000 USD
Population below int. poverty line (%): 47.9
(incl. population in extreme poverty (%): 17.3)
Languages: Spanish, English Creole, Miskito, indigenous languages
People: Mestizo 69%, European descent 17%, African descent 9%, Indigenous peoples 5%

Basic indicators:
Life expectancy at birth: 72 years
Under-5 mortality (per 1,000 live births): 36
Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births): 29 in Nicaragua, 22* in León (*source: HDSS-León)
Total adult literacy rate (2000-2005): 77
Primary school net enrolment ratio: male: 88, female: 86
Percent of primary school entrants reaching grade 5 1990-95: 54

Child protection
Birth registration 1999-2006: urban 90%, rural 73%

Health
Percent of population with access to safe water 2004: total: 79, urban: 90, rural: 63
Percent of population with access to adequate sanitation 2004: total: 47, urban: 56, rural: 34
One of every three children has some degree of chronic malnutrition and nine percent suffer from severe malnutrition.

Human Development Index: 0.710, which gives a country rank of 110th out of 177 countries

Human Development Index: http://hdrstats.undp.org/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_NIC.html
‘The Land of Lakes and Volcanoes’

Nicaragua is characterised by contrasts and extremes. Any first-time visitor to Nicaragua will be touched by the beautiful sight of volcanoes, waters and landscape changing from rainforests to dry desert-like lands. Just as fascinating is the gentleness of the morning light, the dazzling light at noon and the starlit nights. And the wildlife, colourful birds, flowers and trees... Its stunning beauty is in sharp contrast to the devastating damage made by hurricanes, earthquakes, droughts, tsunamis, landslides, floods and volcanic eruptions. The merciless glowing midday sun, torrential rains, the poisonous stings from mosquitoes and scorpions show you, as to leave no room for doubt, that 'heaven and hell' is present all at the same time. It is a truly bewildering experience. The impressions noted down in my diary from my first arrival in Managua, the capital of Nicaragua, captures some of this feeling:

'Just the trip from the airport to here was something to remember! So many people in the streets this early in the morning, walking peacefully in the beautiful soft light to wherever they were heading - to school, to work? Houses still in ruins from the earthquake in 1972 right in the city centre - silent reminders of the breakdown of a dictatorship. An abundance of flowers and trees and then, tiny ramshackle sheds where people live. Managua looks like a village, a village that continues for miles and miles. We see small children running in between the cars at the traffic lights trying to sell cigarettes and papers. And all these children, everywhere…’

A growing number of tourists travelling to Nicaragua confirm that it is one of the most welcoming and hospitable of countries. Still, for the majority of Nicaraguans it is a place of hardship and an everyday struggle to make ends meet. The maxim 'life is hard’ (‘la vida es dura’) as portrayed in Lancaster’s ethnography from a barrio in Managua during the late 80s and early 90s describes the experiences of many of its people (Lancaster, 1992). He concludes that 'as hard as life can be, poverty, injustice and powerlessness make it doubly hard'.

Contrasts also occur in Nicaraguan history, which is marked by polarization, violence, powerful changes, and rapid social transitions. In the last 35 years the country has moved from dictatorship to insurrection and revolution, from civil war and economic crisis back to neoliberal government.

Sibling caretakers in a Nicaraguan context

To understand the structural living conditions for the children in this study, it is important to review the political events and natural disasters which took place during the life spans of the children as well as of their parents.

Nicaragua is a poor country and has been so for centuries. The estimates of people living in extreme poverty vary from 27% to 80% over the years and also depending on how these estimates are calculated, but a range of sources
agree that Nicaragua ranks among the poorest countries in Latin America (CPRC, 2008, INEC, 2006, UNDP, 2005). The Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC) defines Nicaragua as ‘Partially Chronically Deprived’, and suggests that the measure ‘chronic poor’ better describes conditions of poverty. It captures extreme poverty that persists for a long time, and also takes into account that the chronically poor are deprived across multiple dimensions, such as low levels of material assets and socio-political marginality belonging to a group of weak position (Penn, 2005).

Table 2. Natural disasters and political events during the lifespan of parents and children in the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Natural disasters</th>
<th>Political and societal events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Earthquake in Managua</td>
<td>Somoza dictatorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Tsunami, Earthquake</td>
<td>Election Contras war US embargo and subversion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Hurricane ‘Mitch’, Crater lake disruption ‘Las Casitas’ Heavy rains and landslides</td>
<td>Neoliberal governments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Hurricane ‘Felix’ in the Atlantic Coast</td>
<td>Phase out of cotton production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sugar cane production increase People displaced*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td></td>
<td>People displaced* ---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sandinista government elected</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Example of one parent’s age (in years):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Childhood</th>
<th>Adolescence</th>
<th>Adulthood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Example of one child’s age (in years):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Childhood</th>
<th>Adolescence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*new settlements (asentamientos) in the outskirts of León, named: Reparto Austria, 18 Augusto, Adiac, Los Poetas
**migration from rural to urban areas, and also from Nicaragua to Costa Rica, other neighbouring countries and US

CPRC estimate that during 1998-2001 around 52% of Nicaraguans were living under conditions of chronic poverty (CPRC, 2008). In terms of wealth
distribution, the 10% richest households receive 45% of the total income, whereas the poorest 50% receives 14% of the total income (Unicef, 2008).

Table 2 shows a time axis from 1972 to date and highlights the most important events in Nicaragua during this period. Most of the parents in our study were born before the overthrow of the dictator Somoza in 1979, and most children were born during the unsettled times of economic hardship due to civil war and the US embargo. A well-known quote from Dr. Oscar Flores illustrates the harsh conditions prevailing in Nicaragua during the Somoza repression: ‘It used to be a crime to be young in Nicaragua. You could be punished by death from the National Guard if you were over five or death by “natural causes” if you were under five’ (Garfield and Williams, 1989).

‘Los muchachos’ (the kids), were actively involved in the overthrow of the dictator. The Somoza government targeted young people systematically during the insurrection to intimidate and terrify them and their families (Tully, 2007). This was a specific feature of the Nicaraguan revolution and became widely known. In Sweden, for example, a children’s book was published with the title “The barricade” describing how a 12-year old boy becomes involved in the uprising in his ‘barrio’ and gets killed by the National Guards (Zak, 1983).

In the first years after the revolution, major changes in access to health care, schools and property were made. A nation-wide alphabetisation campaign reduced the illiteracy from 88 to 48 percent, and health care was made free for all. Land to cultivate was distributed among the poor and, for the first time, living conditions improved for the people (Plunkett, 1999, Garfield and Williams, 1989).

Figure 1 illustrates that from 1971 the total population increased from 1.87 millions to 5.6 millions in 2006 (INEC, 2008), and approximately 50 000 people lost their lives during the insurrection and contras war (Tully, 2007). Migration to neighbouring countries, especially Costa Rica, and US during these years also increased and close to a 1 million Nicaraguans left to work outside the country (INEC, 2008).

The US has had strong interests in Nicaragua since the 1850s, and they also were in close collaboration with the Somoza administration. The Sandinista revolution fought to put an end to US influence on Nicaraguan internal affairs, but as Lancaster comments:

‘...the elections prove the efficacy of Washington’s war and belligerence: they demonstrate the effectiveness of low-intensity aggression, of war by proxy, and of international electoral meddling carried out by a rich, powerful country against a poor, vulnerable one. Although the Sandinistas made ample mistakes, the consequences of their errors pale before the damage caused by war and embargo’ (Lancaster, 1992).
Figure 1. Population pyramids for the years 1971 and 2005 showing the rapid changes in Nicaraguan society (INEC, 2008)

The escalating economic crisis led to the Sandinistas being defeated in the general elections of 1990. As a response to the urgent economic situation the new neoliberal government introduced Structural Adjustment Programs supported by international lending institutions, such as the World Bank. These programs brought disproportionate negative effects on women and children, the women acted as shock absorbers as they worked longer hours at unpaid work to make up for loss of publicly provided services (Tully, 2007). Inevitably, children who are the most vulnerable in any society were the ones who suffered most. In his article on the effects on children of the aftermath of the war, Quesada summarizes the experiences of Nicaraguan children: ‘Historically, children of Nicaragua have lived and died in the context of extreme poverty, violence and war. Following the contra war, the quality of life deteriorated for many children’ (Quesada, 1998).

León, the location for the sibling caretaker study, is the second largest city in Nicaragua, with a population of 195,000 inhabitants. It played an important part in the popular uprising and struggle against the Somoza regime. The Sandinista-movement was strong in the area, engaging mostly young people and students at the León University, one of the first universities in Central America. The formation of the community based organization Movimiento Comunal (communal movement) was instrumental in the development of the governance of the city. This was done through the creation of a network of voluntary health workers, ‘brigadistas’, which strengthened community participation and the organization of the health services (Garfield and Williams, 1989, Pérez Monteil and Barten, 1999). When León was hit by hurricane Mitch in 1998 it was the organizational capacity and prompt action of the local bodies that made the disaster less devastating (Pérez Monteil and Barten, 1999).

The closing down of cotton production in the León area caused many people, to move from the rural areas to new ‘asentamientos’, semi-urban
settlements, in town. Unemployment has remained high causing people, mostly men, to migrate to neighbouring countries and the US seeking work, leaving split families behind. A lasting effect of the cotton monoculture is an environmental disaster from the extensive use of pesticides in the north-west region of Nicaragua. Local water sources and land were contaminated and deforestation brought even more people to leave the countryside and settle in the urban areas (Pérez Monteil and Barten, 1999).

**Gender and sibling caretakers**

‘... because I was an illiterate in childhood. I didn’t learn to read until after the revolution. When I was 38, I learned to read and got to the second level of writing in the fourth grade.’

Woman activist in León

Just as children were actively engaged in the insurrection and revolution, so were women (Garfield and Williams, 1989, Ellsberg, 2000). During the first years after the revolution women activists participated in the extensive health and literacy campaigns. A series of social reforms were carried out, which had a profound effect on women’s lives, although gender equality was never fully translated into public policy (Ellsberg et al., 2001). Many of those achievements were then lost in the following years; free day-care centres for children were closed down, school fees introduced and health care privatized. As a consequence of the migration, mostly women were recruited to work in the ‘Zonas Francas’ (labour-intensive industries, manufacturing mainly textiles established in León area in recent years), resulting in that more children were left home alone.

The culture of ‘machismo’ prevailing in Nicaragua influences all levels of society. The traditional ideas about masculinity labelled ‘machismo’ are defined as a ‘system of manliness’ (Lancaster, 1992). The stereotyped expressions of machismo ‘maintain mans superiority and dominance over women, granting him the right to do as he pleases within and outside the family home and the authority to restrict the freedom of his wife, sisters and daughters’ (Gutman, 2005).

The ideal of femininity is primarily that of elevated motherhood and that a woman’s place is in the home (Lancaster, 1992). It has been suggested that the way in which femininity is being created in Nicaraguan women is through the notion of being a hardworking and self-sacrificing housekeeper guiding the activities of the house. (Johansson, 1999). She puts forward that ‘...in the Nicaraguan case, loyalty and respect are the most important norms for daughtering, which are created and established in a matrifocal pattern’.

In this context it is hardly surprising that one third of households in Nicaragua is headed by single women (Agurto and Guido, 2004). Similarly, it is
a well recognized custom to employ girls in domestic work – ‘hija de casa’ (‘girl of the house’). It is thought to be good for girls to learn household work from an early age. They are also expected to help in their own households and it is common for girls to work as caretakers for their siblings (IPEC, 2002). Despite these prevailing norms, boys are often engaged as sibling caretakers, carrying out the same duties as the girls (Paper I and II). This is in line with the arguments Punch maintain in her study on household division of labour in rural Bolivia, that whilst adult household labour is highly determined by gender roles, children’s unpaid household work often cuts across gender stereotypes (Punch, 2007).
Aims

‘How do the sibling caretakers see it themselves?’ was the overall research question this thesis tries to answer. Accordingly, it explores the phenomenon of sibling caretaking with focus on how it was perceived by sibling caretakers in poor areas in León, Nicaragua. The knowledge gained from this study may be further utilised to plan for interventions that take children’s perspectives into consideration.

Specific aims were

- to explore and understand the everyday lives of sibling caretakers, based on their own experiences
- to include sibling caretakers in the research process to ensure rigour of the findings to empower them
- to explore adults’ perspectives on sibling caretaking to capture how children caretakers are perceived in the society and to address life course perspectives for sibling caretakers
- to analyse patterns of school absence among children in León and to identify factors associated with having schooling gaps
Research process and methods

An overview of the four papers making up this thesis is presented in Table 3. Focus of the different papers, participants, methods of data collection and analyses are briefly described.

The qualitative research on sibling caretaking (Papers I-III) was characterized by an emergent design. The opening research question of ‘how sibling caretakers see it’ led us to essentially use ethnographic approaches since it facilitated a more child-centred view. Fieldwork and data collection for these papers are based on observations, field notes, interviews and participatory activities.

A quantitative study on school attendance (Paper IV) was included to highlight the finding that the experienced limited access to education was one of the major problems for sibling caretakers. We analysed schooling gaps among 370 children 6-16 years to identify factors associated with school absence.

Research setting in León, CIDS

This work originates from a demographic and health research project in León, with the overall aim to generate new knowledge in the area of public health. Since its initiation in 1991, the research has focused on studies of reproductive health, domestic violence, mental health and child health (Herrera et al., 2006, Zelaya Blandón, 1999, Peña, 1999, Valladares Cardoza, 2005, Ellsberg, 2000, Caldera Aburto, 2004). A surveillance site collecting demographic data from 10 994 households in both rural and urban areas of León, was established in 2002 by the Centre for Demography and Health Research (CIDS) at León University. This was done in collaboration with the Division of Epidemiology, Department of Public Health and Clinical Medicine at Umeå University with the financial support from Sida/SAREC (Peña et al., 2008). The Health and Demographic Surveillance System (HDSS-León) enables research, interventions and health planning for the León municipality as the database is representative for the whole area. The selected households are visited at regular intervals, and vital statistics and socio-economic data are collected by specially trained fieldworkers. The HDSS is also supported by a sophisticated Geographic Information System (GIS) that maps all the included households.

The research team

The research team for the fieldwork was composed of Swedish social scientists from Umeå University (Lars Dahlgren and Kjerstin Dahlblom) and Nicaraguan public health researchers (Rodolfo Peña and Andrés Herrera) at CIDS.
Table 3. Overview of the papers comprising the thesis work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Papers</th>
<th>Focus of the study</th>
<th>Methods of data collection</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Methods of analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I - Dahlblom K, Herrera Rodríguez A, Peña R, Dahlgren L (2008). <em>Home alone: Children as caretakers in León, Nicaragua.</em> <em>Children &amp; Society, early online publication.</em></td>
<td>Explore and understand the life situations of sibling caretakers in poor areas in León</td>
<td>Ethnographic approach: Observations, interviews, photos</td>
<td>22 ♂=7 ♀=15</td>
<td>Ethnographic analysis: thick description, emerging themes, theoretical framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II - Dahlblom K, Herrera Rodríguez A, Peña R, Dahlgren L (2008). ‘Everybody should help in their own house, because if they don’t, who will?’ Children providing for siblings in León, Nicaragua. <em>Childhood</em>, under review.</td>
<td>Explore how young people perceive their work as caretakers for younger siblings</td>
<td>Ethnographic approach: Multistage FGDs, interviews, written narratives, photos, drawings, Participatory Action Research</td>
<td>9 ♂=2 ♀=7</td>
<td>Ethnographic analysis: thick description, emerging themes, theoretical framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III – Dahlblom, K (2008). <em>Estrella: a gifted narrative.</em> <em>Childhoods today,</em> under review.</td>
<td>Gain insight into a girls’ experience as sibling caretaker</td>
<td>Written story In-depth interview</td>
<td>♀=1</td>
<td>Narrative analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Over the years the team was assisted by Nicaraguan research colleagues as facilitators in the fieldwork and in conducting interviews (Pedro Munguía, Santos Betancourth, Rigo Sampson, Jacobo Morales, Ricardo Guevara, Ever Tellez and Claudia Obando). Input and support was also provided from the staff at CIDS in fieldwork and data processing (Marlon Melendez, Maria Teresa Orozco, Margarita Chévez, Francisco Centeno, Marlon Cerna, Ramiro Bravo and Azucena Espinoza).

Essential for the organisation of the research team was the inclusion of mixed competencies across cultures. The ‘inside’ perspective of the local context was represented by the Nicaraguan researchers, and the ‘outside’ perspective by the Swedish counterparts. Experiences from working with children and young people in varied settings were shared by several team members.

After having conducted several interviews, I summarised in my diary from the fieldwork: ‘... we have found a model of how to work together which seems to be functioning well: I prepare most of the questions, Andrés performs the interviews and does most of the talking, I record and observe and add questions if I want him to probe on something as I can follow quite well by now what they are talking about. To sit three together is somehow more relaxing for the interviewee – that is my feeling. Andrés also is very careful to describe our roles as researchers within the project and I have a feeling that it is an advantage that I represent something that for them shows that their situation is known and somebody "out there" actually cares. And Andrés can also tell people of results from the ongoing project and they recognize that this is a project that is actually doing something for the poor.’

My role in the fieldwork was mainly as a participating observer. Although my Spanish gradually improved, I never ventured to make my own research interviews. This actually seemed to strengthen the interview situations. To have a local researcher with a good preunderstanding of the setting as main responsible for the interviewing and with me as assistant facilitated the interaction. The power relations were more balanced when they could sense that they were the experts on both the language and their work. At the same time they perceived that their situation as sibling caretakers was special. To have a visitor from a far away country, asking them about their every day lives, made them aware of their responsibilities and contributions to their families. Another important aspect when interviewing children is that they can find the one-to-one attention of an adult investigator threatening (Woodhead, 1998). We aimed at joining up as a small group with the caretakers, and perhaps include siblings, when performing the interviews in the homes to ease these tensions. It was sometimes difficult to arrange for a confidential talk, but we preferred the open way of talking with the children to minimise spreading of rumours by suspicious neighbours.
Here is a typical situation from one of our interviews: ‘We arrived at around six (PM), and the mother was still at work, but ‘Isabel’ was expecting us and brought the chairs so we could sit in the usual place in the patio. Her uncle dropped by to tell us that the baby was better today and then he put out the bird – a parrot – quite close to where we were sitting so that it – as usual – would make a lot of noise during the recording….I sat beside her this time. She was much more relaxed, and the interview was open hearted. We discussed what she had felt during the previous interview... ...All around us, people were talking and children were playing, crying and screaming, some even passing where we were sitting. Every now and the alarm on Andrés car was started, making an awful noise and adding to the commotion that always seem to be present in this neighbourhood’.

The setting

León Santiago de los Caballeros is the full name of León. It is located in the north-west of the country, close to the Pacific coast. The university founded in 1812 contributes to the city's young profile where almost 80% of the population lives in urban areas. The poverty is estimated to be 47% and most of the non poor people live in the city centre while the poorer live in the ‘asentamientos’ in the semi-urban area of town (Peña et al., 2008).

Compared to many cities in Central America, where violence and crime prevail, León is known for being a beautiful, peaceful and friendly city. It is considered the intellectual and cultural heart of Nicaragua. My perception is that the ‘Leoneses‘ have a strong sense of belonging, and love their city in a way that for me is unusual. They are proud to be from León and the saying ‘Viva León, jodido!’ (‘Cheers to León, damn it!!!’) capture feelings people have for their city. Although they complain that it is often too hot, very poor and many of its people live in hardship, they still consider León the best place on earth. In the evenings many people move their rocking chairs out on the street and you have a feeling of being invited to their living rooms. Transport with taxis is also a nice experience, most people can afford a taxi since they have a fixed price and pick up those passengers that want to go more or less in the same direction. Addresses are given in descriptions such as ‘3 blocks to the west, 2 down to the east from Central Park’ as the street names never are used to locate places. On your way to the office, you might find yourself sharing the taxi with a lady bringing chicken to sell in the market and some students on their way to class.

One very special characteristic of León from a visitor’s point of view is the ‘sound pollution‘. In this excerpt from my diary I describe a typical September morning in León,

‘...It was still early morning, but I woke up to the usual racket of church bells, fire works, radios - neighbours listening different channels in different houses, trying to shout each other down -, dogs barking, cocks crowing, rain against the tin roofs, ice
creams bells, street vendors calling out ‘mangos’, ‘papaya’ or ‘tortilla’, horses and buses and the hacking cough from the next door neighbour when he got out of bed… It’s hard to believe, but you actually get used to it! The church bells from the nearest of the uncountable churches are the worst, they sound as if someone is having a wild outburst on an enormous saucepan! This is definitely one of the noisiest places on earth! Since the 14th of September there have been fireworks and rumble at least two times a day, and yesterday they had a big procession in the honour of the Virgin Mercedes. I am told that the celebration will reach its climax tomorrow, when a statue of the Virgin will be brought from the main cathedral to her very own cathedral some blocks away in an even bigger procession. This will bring about even more fireworks and ringing of church bells. On top of all this noise is the old tradition of running the fire alarm at 7 in the morning and at noon to remind all people that it’s time to start working and then time for lunch. And still, the racket in September is nothing compared to all the noise in December!’

**Child work in León**

Since many years a number of NGOs are active in the León area, and they collaborate under the administrative conduct of Comisión Coordinadora de la Niñez y la Adolescencia (CCAN). It serves as a link between the NGOs, local authorities and the governmental education and health authorities. Around 14 different NGOs are engaged in activities directed towards children in León. They aim to divide their activities so that as many areas and people as possible benefit from their joint actions. JDANJUL (Junta Departamental de Apoyo a la Juventud Leones) also work in promoting León as a safe city, and to introduce leadership among young people.

It is estimated that around 17-20 000 children in León were working in 2004 (IPEC, 2002). Most common works were garbage collecting at the big city dump, vendors in the streets or markets and domestic work. In these calculations children working in their own homes were not included. Domestic work is not considered as hazardous as the others, and the efforts have been mainly to prevent children working as garbage collectors. Several reports on children’s situation in León are available from the NGOs (Anguera Calaf, 2003, Martín Díaz, 2003, Peña and Valladares, 2001)

‘The first thing is to sensitize all boys and girls (in our project areas). They have to know that child labour violates their rights, we are going to talk to them about what the constitution says, what the code of labour says: children who are younger than 14 years old are forbidden to work in any kind of job. Children who are 14 to 18 years old may work for a maximum of 6 hours and they must be allowed to attend school. They should not work in the worst kind of child labour, they must not be exploited from 14 to 18 years old, so, they have to know their rights’.

Promoter, CISAS, Niño-a-niño in León.
CCAN holds considerable knowledge about children’s living conditions in the León area, and although that there are no surveys made on the magnitude of sibling caretaking, they acknowledge that the phenomenon is common, especially in the ‘asentamientos’.

**Education in León**

Apart from areas in the Atlantic coast, school enrolment in León is lower than in many other parts of Nicaragua despite the presence of an old university, (INEC, 2006). This is further illustrated in the Lorenz curve constructed from the data in HDSS-León (Figure 2) showing that non-attendance varies considerably between different areas in León. The Gini index was calculated to measure school absence for all school age children between 7 and 14 years registered in a surveillance database in urban León. Cross-sectional data on school attendance for 6886 children was extracted from the database. The Gini coefficient for the absenteeism as related to population was 0.5.

![Figure 2. The Lorenz curve shows the percentage of non-attenders by cumulative percentage of the population.](image-url)
**Actors and study population**

The qualitative study included children, young people and adults (Papers I-III). The youngest sibling caretakers were seven years old at time of interview. The major part of our data was obtained from interviews with children in the age-groups 7 to 16 years. The principal selection criteria were being under 18 years of age and caretaker for a sibling or a younger child living in the same household. We also interviewed parents, relatives, friends and neighbours to a selected group of the caretakers. Other informants were community leaders, volunteers, and teachers in various settings.

All sibling caretakers interviewed were selected using the HDSS-León database. To have a diverse selection, we included children from different geographical areas, focusing on more deprived areas. The children were selected in collaboration with health care staff, community leaders or NGOs active in these districts.

In the school absence study, we selected from the HDSS-León data-base a stratified random sample of 170 households, including 370 children in the age-group 6 to 16 years (Paper IV). The selection was made in two steps. First, geographical strata formed the basis to select school-age children in various areas in urban León. Second, the selected households generated the children constituting the study population so that all children living in the selected households were included also when they were not siblings or relatives. Four fieldworkers were trained for the interviewing and the fieldwork was conducted in the end of the school year in December 2003 (Paper IV).

**Data collection and quality control**

To investigate the phenomenon of sibling caretaking in this Nicaraguan context (Paper I-III), data was collected from a variety of sources. The design was governed by the focus on capturing the immediate subjective experience of the caretakers. To attain the long-term consequences of caretaking we included views from both children and adults. As described in papers I and II, we used a multi-method approach combining observations, interviews, group discussions, written stories, drawings and self-directed photography (Table 4).

This *triangulation* increased the trustworthiness of our research (Dahlgren et al., 2004). The flexible approach made it easier for us to ensure that also the children’s narratives were voiced. (Woodhead, 1998, Fraser, 2004, Greig and Taylor, 2007, Johnson, 1998, Lindh-Munther, 1999, Norman, 1996, Quesada, 1998). *Member checks* were also made to ensure rigour in our findings and interpretations (Dahlgren et al., 2004).
Starting in 1999, I spent time in León at regular intervals. It provided an opportunity for me to keep in touch with the children in the study, as well as become a part of the research environment in CIDS. The visits usually lasted for 4-6 weeks each time, and I participated both in planning and conducting of activities during the data collection periods.

The interviews with the participants were audio-taped, transcribed and translated into English. All translations were made by the same person (Sandra Sampson), who grew up in León and is familiar with the setting and the project. The Nicaraguan researchers checked the translations for accuracy.

We used a semi-structured questionnaire (Appendix 1), asking the sibling caretakers to describe their activities during a typical day, their family composition and school attendance. We also asked them how they felt about looking after their siblings and their work in the house. The interviews with other informants were less structured and the main questions concerned their views on and experiences of sibling caretaking.

The focus group discussions were lead by Andrés Herrera with me as observer and facilitator. A note taker and observer from the research team (Ricardo Guevara) was also present, but he was not involved in the activities of the group. He later transcribed the recorded discussions, which were translated into English.

For the school absence study (Paper IV) we employed a questionnaire to be completed by the children (Figure 3). They provided information on repetition, initial enrolment, intermissions and dropout.
Data from the questionnaires was entered into an Access-database and later linked to the HDSS to merge the information of the socio-economic status of households with the self-reported school attendance. Level of education and occupation of head of households were also included. Linking was possible for 341 out of the 370 children. For the statistical analyses the database was transferred to SPSS version 15.

The ethnographic approach (Papers I-III)

Ethnographic approaches are central in childhood research (James et al., 1998) and especially in the context of the home setting (Weisner and Gallimore, 1977). As James puts it “...central to the social study of childhood remains the commitment to understanding the everyday social worlds of children as children do, and to seeing children as informed and engaged social actors” (James, 2001).

Since the main focus with this study was to explore and understand the experiences of sibling caretakers in León, from their own point of view, we applied an ethnographic approach (Agar, 1996, Norman, 1996, Quesada, 1998, Wolcott, (1967) 2003). We found this method best suited for exploring the social worlds of children as ‘it recognises children as active social agents managing their own experiences’ (James et al., 1998). This requires that the researchers move away from their adult-centred understanding to learn the ways in which children’s social worlds are shaped (Emond, 2005).

In ethnography, participant observation plays an important role when learning about other people’s lives (Spradley, 1980). However, we found it difficult for us to stay in the homes with the children without interfering with their normal lives, as it was impossible for us to assume roles as people of their own age. We perceived that the power relations between adults and children would cause problems and that it might be hard for the researcher not to be actively involved in the routines of the home in a supervisory manner. Other researchers doing research with children have experienced the same and it is
recognised that it is difficult for adults to ‘blend into’ the children’s environment. Emond suggests that the investigator rather should be involved as a semi-participant observer instead of trying to become fully participant (Emond, 2005).

Our study is characterized as more data loaded than theory driven and the whole process as an oscillation between induction and deduction. Following advices from Lincoln and Guba (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) we have chosen an emergent design and to mix a variety of techniques and tools where the young people’s accounts provided the ‘thick description’ (as labelled by Geertz (Geertz, 1973)) on sibling caretaking. A rich, detailed and concrete description ideally opens up for the reader to understand, and draw own interpretations about meaning and significance of the phenomenon studied (Quinn Patton, 2002). In a situation where you actually cannot directly and in detail observe what you want to study you need to find alternative ways of obtaining information. In the case of sibling caretakers we collected firsthand data in ways that enabled them to express their views freely.

Table 5. Different tools used in the sibling caretaker study (Paper II, Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Aim</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Citations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multistage focus group discussions</td>
<td>To get to know the sibling caretakers work</td>
<td>Detailed descriptions of caretaker’s daily work</td>
<td>“We were here as if with family, we felt like, we realized we are all useful and that we have difficulties…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To gather a group that can share and compare experiences, bring awareness and give opportunity to reflect on their work</td>
<td>Discussion of attitudes to and normative aspects of sibling caretaking and caretakers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To identify needs that can improve their situation</td>
<td>Appreciation of group activities and own work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual interviews</td>
<td>To add individual perspectives that were not brought up in the group, feelings and concerns</td>
<td>Images of perceptions, attitudes and patterns of behaviour</td>
<td>“I feel happier now when I talked to other people because I had never talked about my life in my house”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social network charts</td>
<td>Find out the social relationships in their families and with peers</td>
<td>Identification of positions in social networks</td>
<td>“…friends are also close, and at the same time far because I don’t spend much time with them for taking care of my siblings.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short written narratives</td>
<td>To know about their daily activities, feelings and concerns</td>
<td>Issues of concern brought up by the young people themselves while reflecting on their work as sibling caretakers</td>
<td>“…I like to take care of the little boy because he is closer to me, and wherever I go he wants me to take him along”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-directed photos</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“…I was very happy because I had never held a camera in my hands…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“… I wanted to represent in this drawing the different kinds of jobs there are and also for people to realize that not only young people work, also children do.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Paper II we described how the emergent study design evolved stepwise, starting with a discussion group consisting of nine young people. From there, we developed various participatory research activities over a period of more than one year. One activity led to another as shown in Table 5.

Sibling caretaking implies that the children are at home on their own, without adult supervision. Some of the techniques employed were used especially to catch the caretaker’s experiences during these situations, such as the use of disposable cameras, and written narratives. Through member checks we could discuss and validate our interpretations of their accounts. (Paper II).

We used a selection of activities from ‘The children’s protocol for participatory research’ elaborated by Woodhead (Woodhead, 1998). The protocol comprises semi-structured activities and games focusing on key themes in children’s lives and is designed as a resource for group work (Table 2). The activities were adjusted to cover the appropriate research questions and themes in our study. To compare experiences within the group, we asked the young people to take turns in telling us what they had done the previous day.

Photo-Elicitation Interviewing (PEI), where the participants take their own photos to be used as later interview stimuli, is commonly used in interview contexts (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004, Ibanez, 1994). We gave cameras to our participants as a way to give the young people the initiative, and for them to choose what experiences they considered important to share.

When exploring adults’ perspectives on sibling caretaking (Paper I) we chose to conduct in-depth interviews to capture how they perceive children caretakers in the society and to address life course perspectives for sibling caretakers. To give a comprehensive picture of sibling caretaking we compared the different perspectives of children, adults and researchers.
Analyses

Paper I-II

In qualitative research the oscillation strategy implies that we have been guided by an analytic frame: ‘an outline of an idea about some phenomenon’ and constitutes: ‘ways of seeing’ (Ragin, 1994); in the first place based on the pre-understanding of mine, my colleagues, and key informants. It induced us to look for structural conditions as well as cultural norms influencing and restricting our target group from outside as well as inside. Our ambitions to generalize are defined to suggest hypothetical patterns regarding the lived experiences of sibling caretakers.

Figure 4. Understanding of sibling caretaking: - the interplay between theory and data.

Following Ragin, our design can be labelled retroductive even if it, as mentioned above, was more governed by data than theory driven. Based on data we constructed images of caretaking and, as a second step, increased the understanding of the phenomenon. Figure 4 illustrate this process ending up with four findings that together illuminate the phenomenon of sibling caretaking.

When analysing the ethnographic data (Papers I and II) we identified three important structuring conditions affecting sibling caretakers in Nicaragua: chronic poverty, migration and mobility and loose family structures. A number of different themes, central for understanding the situation of sibling caretakers, emerged. They are organized and presented under the following headings in Paper I: household work, child care, school attendance, life trajectories of caretakers, and ‘the adult child’. In Paper II the themes were
slightly different since they represented the caretakers view only: working as sibling caretaker, social networks, work and school, and everyday lives.

Reflexivity is important in qualitative research, in that it acknowledges the subjectivity of research. Data are always presented through the ‘lens’ of the researcher and a reflexive process gives the reader insight to how data was gathered and interpreted (Emond, 2005). Emond also stresses that researchers reflect not only on the data, but also on their use of self within fieldwork.

Paper III
In Paper III a narrative analysis was applied on a short story, resembling a poem in its structure. It is written by a young girl describing a turning point in her life while taking care of her niece. We choose to concentrate on this particular narrative since it, in a condensed form, captured a feeling experienced by many of the caretakers; the very strong feeling that the care for a small child is one of the most important things in life.

The ‘unpacking’ of the structure of the text is a useful tool for analysis and interpretation of a story (Riessmann, 1993). In this case, we were also able to discuss the interpretation with the girl, and it became an opportunity for her to disclose her concerns about her future.

Paper IV
In the school absence paper (Paper IV), multivariate logistic regression was used to analyse the associations between schooling gap and its’ possible predictors. Besides poverty, sex and age, we used preschool attendance and the education of the mothers. Statistical significance was achieved if a 95% confidence interval had not included the value 1.
Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the ethical clearance authorities at both León University and Umeå University, Sweden. Apart from asking the children themselves, permission to interview was sought through community leaders, a health centre, health promoters, and the NGOs working in the different areas. In some cases we were unable to have verbal consent from parents, but we then obtained consent from the person in custody of the child.

Information about the project was given both verbally and in writing and in meetings with representatives from the municipality and NGOs. All participants accepted and agreed to be part of the study after being informed about its purpose. The majority had a low level of education and therefore their verbal consent was considered appropriate.

We made sure that someone the children knew well was present when introducing them to the research team, and when inviting them to participate in the project. Names of the participating children have been changed to avoid the possibility of identifying any individual child. In some instances we also provided for individual counselling, medical treatment and referral to the outpatient services in mental health, Centro de Atención Psicosocial (CAPS) and Primary Health Care services.
Findings

Most participants in this study were girls, and although women are thought to be main responsible for the household domain, we found it quite common also for boys to care for siblings.

Proud to be working

‘I have always liked to work, it is a nice experience because I can be with other children, like I said before, there is time for everything. I consider myself a child who takes care of children, but I have always been responsible for them and I do the job the best I can’.

Girl, 17 years, caretaker for 7 years.

The overall finding from the ethnographic study (Papers I-III) is summarised by the girl cited above. For most of the sibling caretakers work was considered a natural part of their everyday lives and which filled them with pride. They perceived their work as important for their families and they appreciated to fend for their siblings. Consider the following excerpt from an interview with a 17 year old boy ‘Juan’:

Interviewer: And how old were you when you started taking care of your younger brothers?
Juan: Around 14 years old, I think I was even younger when I started working, first they left me taking care of the little girl, I was younger yes, I was about 11 years old and they left me in charge, they left me with the responsibility.
Interviewer: And how do you feel about the job you are doing, are you afraid, do you fear anything about the job you are doing, how do you feel?
Juan: No, I am not afraid at all, I don’t fear anything, the other way around, I feel happy that I am taking care of my little brother, he is the one I love the most and he likes to go out with me, when I am going to go out he wants me to take him with me.
Interviewer: You are saying you feel very good with that job, how proud are you of the job you do?
Juan: Well, I feel proud and I know I do things on my own, there is no need for no one to tell me to do things because I do them without having anyone tell …. I have heard my neighbours advise their children, they say, “do what Juan does, that boy helps his mom and his dad, he takes care of the boy and helps around the house”, and that makes me feel proud, to know that they are taking me as an example.

The following quote from an interview with 15 year old girl ‘Ana’ shows the same mindset, only she stresses that the responsibility is not hers alone. She also expressed these views on her obligations in the group discussions (as quoted in Paper II, p 13):

Interviewer: How do you feel about the job you do, are you afraid or scared of the job you do?
Ana: No, I feel good, it is normal because children are all working now, so I have no reason to feel bad.

Interviewer: So what job do you consider normal?
Ana: Yes, it's like growing up, it is normal for one to grow up.

Interviewer: So working is an obligation for children?
Ana: No, not for all of them because my grandmother, she says it is good for me to work, because it is my obligation. But it is not my obligation, my obligation is to study not to work... but, both things are my obligation, to work and to study. So working and helping my mom do things, that is my obligation, but spending so much time with my little sister is not my obligation.

Interviewer: Do you know that when people work they feel proud?
Ana: Yes

Interviewer: How is that with you?
Ana: To me I'm proud because I feel useful like that, that is how I learn and the older I get, the better. I won’t be useless. Like my grandmother says, there are girls my age who have children and they don’t know how to do anything, they can’t work or even cook beans or boil an egg. ’

Interviewer: And you can do that, right?
Ana: Yes.

Household work and care of siblings

From the group discussions we collected several accounts on what a typical day for a caretaker would be like. We usually started the sessions by asking about their work and these are some of the answers:

‘... eh, my sister works in Nagarote and she travels, so it is harder for me (more work) because I have to take care of the children, the both of them, and her husband is working, sometimes he gets back late. I have been on exams and I have to cook, I have to bathe the children and that is hard when I have to study.’

‘In my case, since I was in exams, I was getting home around 1 or 2 in the afternoon, because school is a bit far, I would eat lunch and then clean the house or look after my nephew and also my little sister. Sometimes I would come home and cook and if my mom was to go out in the afternoon, then I was in charge and had to look after them.

‘Well, in my case, everyday, he, my sisters boy, is on vacation already since yesterday, and I always prepare him to take him to class, I was going to bring him here (since he was on vacation). I help my mom who is a vendor, she works in the market and when she goes out I am the one who stays at home, I clean, I take care of the boy and also of my little brother’.

‘After I come back from school, I am responsible for the little girl, and I have another seven year old niece who I care for. Eh, the girl is a little bit delicate, she gets sick all the time, I have to take care of her more now. She is very mischievous; I have to be following her around so that she doesn’t hurt herself. In the afternoon I make dinner, I cook in the afternoon. When my sister comes back from work she only eats dinner.'
My sister is having problems, so I take care of her girl, she is always out. In reality, the little girl is more used to me than to her mom. Eh, in my house I clean, wash the dishes, clean the rooms, since I am always alone with the two girls, I help my seven year old niece do her homework, I prepare her uniform for the next day. I feed the little girl her snack at around four, her milk, and I take care of them.

These accounts illustrate how the young people were involved in domestic work and caretaking. It was evident that they were experienced and conducted their tasks with great autonomy.

Education

A major finding in our study was the low educational level among the caretakers. Combining household work and caretaking with school was a challenge for most of them. ‘Ana’ chose to live with her siblings in their grandmothers house after the mother had moved together with a new man. The on-going family conflict affected her a lot and she started to lag behind in class. ‘Ana’ explains:

Ana: .... because I can’t do anything now, because my mom punished me for failing classes, just that, I plan to study and work. My grandmother says that I don’t want to continue studying, so she wants me to go to school on Saturdays and to work during the week and go to school on Saturdays.

Interviewer: And what do you think about that?
Ana: I want...

Interviewer: Tell me about what you want, what are your ideas?
Ana: To continue studying, my grandmother is the one who says I don’t want to continue studying.

Interviewer: And what do you say?
Ana: I say I do want to study, because if I didn’t want to continue studying I would have told my mom a long time ago to stop wasting her money on me, but I want to continue studying.

The awareness that they missed out on education was the most problematic issue for the group of caretakers (Paper II). Although all nine were studying in second grade, five were lagging behind. Among the children presented in Paper I, only two out of 22 were in the grade corresponding to their age and none of older ones had continued to secondary school.

Schooling gaps

The above findings led us to conduct a cross-sectional study of school attendance among 370 children, 6-16 year old, to review the educational situation in León. The results from this study among children in León, confirm national figures. A logistic regression analysis showed that boys drop out and
repeat more than girls and that poverty is associated with low school attendance (Table 6).

Table 6. Risk factor analysis for having a schooling gap.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>OR</th>
<th>95.0% C.I. for</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>1.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In preschool</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>1.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An association was found for not being in preschool. Although the majority of children in our study actually did attend school, many of them lagged behind. The risk of having a schooling gap increased with age. Already at the age of 12 as many as 41% of the children had a schooling gap of one year or more. At the age of 16 only 25% of boys and 20% of girls had managed to reach grade 6. They started lagging behind in 2nd grade, and the number of repeaters increased for every grade. Accordingly, each grade had children in various ages.

**Life trajectories of sibling caretakers**

When discussing the future, it was clear to us that the adolescents (Paper II) had made plans they regarded as realistic, and above all, they hoped to be able to complete their studies. As their small siblings grew up and were in need of less attention, they perceived that the caring did not interfere with their future plans. However, since most of the sibling caretakers (Paper I) did not pursue their studies, they faced less options for the future. Few of them had made concrete plans other than helping their families in the daily survival.
Discussion

Sibling caretaking, although common across time and cultures, have not been well researched from the carers point of view. We chose to focus on this aspect when we started the project on sibling caretaking in Nicaragua to broaden the understanding of the phenomenon and how it is represented in a setting undergoing a rapid social transition. The structuring conditions of chronic poverty, loose family structures, migration and mobility shape the living conditions for a majority of Nicaraguans. The country’s historical background makes the old practise of shared management child care a necessity. Many children are therefore expected to help in their own households and care for their siblings and other children living in their households - usually nephews, nieces or cousins.

With our pre-understanding based in a public health perspective, we reasoned that sibling caretakers were at risk in the same way as street children and working children are, only that they were not visible in public spaces. Referring back to Ragin who labels this approach ‘giving voice’, where the researcher asserts that every group in society has a ‘story to tell’ (Ragin, 1994), we focused on collecting data from the caretakers themselves, to give voice these ‘invisible’ children.

By necessity assuming the responsibilities of adults

In Paper I, we tell in the story of ‘Isabel’, who speaks about her feelings of being a caretaker in these words: ‘… for me, they are my daughters, because my mother is working every day… If my mother wasn’t away working I would feel sad, because then I could not, I could not take care of them’.

This quote illustrates how caretakers become carriers of a prevailing family norm, that is, to keep the family together as if mother, father and their children were living together. This norm is deep contrast with reality for many poor Nicaraguans marked by the recurrent violent disasters and events in their country. To live together in extended families is common in agricultural societies, and this was predominant in Nicaragua before the overthrow of Somoza. The changing structural conditions have caused families to split, but the traditional family values have paved way for another type of shared management child care. From the HDSS surveys in León it is estimated that 35% of all households are made up of single mothers and their children, which is the same as in all Nicaragua (Agurto and Guido, 2004). Several scholars within ethnography describe these living arrangements as ‘matrifocal’ and common in Latin America and the Caribbean, where mothers and adult daughters often form the household core (Quinlan, 2006, Johansson, 1999). ‘Matrifocality’ have been defined as a domestic form in which only a mother and
her dependent children are present or significant (Schwimmer, 2003). There is a
debate of how this type of residence form should be understood, but it is agreed
that it is usually the result from an undesired event; for example, a father
abandoning his family, or he refuses to acknowledge responsibility for his
children. It is prevalent in communities in which men are not able to meet
domestic commitments because of unemployment or poverty (Schwimmer,
2003). We found that this type of household composition was common in our
study and fits well with the observations in our fieldwork. A promoter from a
NGO comments:

‘And we have found households where the girls, specially older girls, take on the role
of the mother and the father, she is the one in charge of caring for the children and
sometimes they take it very seriously. They feel responsible and cannot stop doing it
because they think it is something they must do, because that is how it is supposed to
be, that is their destiny. GOD gave them that life, that destiny and they have to live
with it as it is a role they have to play in their life’.

Boys are also engaged as sibling caretakers. In our study, they shared the
same views as the girls on their responsibilities and felt important in their
families. From a gender perspective, we had expected that they would be
embarrassed about having to take on domestic work, but they did not convey
any such feelings. In Nicaragua, where the house is considered a woman’s
domain, sibling caretakers basically have the same duties, regardless if they are
girls or boys. Although it is much less common for boys to become caretakers,
there seems to be no problem for boys to engage in typical women’s duties, at
least not when they are very young. We interpret this as it is more important
what position a child have in their family to become a caretaker, and that
stereotyped gender roles are less influential for this choice.

**Becoming mature and achieving life skills**

“Everyone should help in their own house, because if they don’t, who will?”

Boy, 16 years

In our study we found that the caretakers were very positive towards their
small siblings. They enjoyed looking after them and felt very strongly for them
“as if they were their own children”. Kosonen have reported similar findings
from her study on siblings in Scotland that both caretakers and those who were
looked after perceived it as a predominantly positive experience (Kosonen,
1996).

Aragão-Lagergren found in an interview-study with Nicaraguan working
children that most of them had worked with the same task for several years. A
decision to change work was usually not made by the children themselves, and
the income from their work was brought home and added considerably to the
Kjerstin Dahlblom

The common myths that "street children" lack work commitment and shift from one activity to another in a casual manner is strongly rejected in her thesis. Her conclusions are in line with our findings, where several of the older children had been working as caretakers for many years, and the decision to do so was taken by their mothers. Since the same child continues to care for his or her siblings for years, it seems that this is a way to ensure stability in the family. (Paper I) Through their daily work and concerns, they develop a heightened sense of responsibility and after a few years as caretaker most of them seem to be comfortable in that role. Experiences from research with street-working children shows that their work can be seen as an agent of socialization (Invernezzi, 2003, Woodhead, 1999). For sibling caretakers the household work and nurturing of siblings is shaping their future lives and constitutes part of their socialization. Their work can also bring self-worth and increase self-esteem, especially when they become aware of their importance for their families.

Missing out on education

The educational levels of the caretakers in our study were generally low, so that most of the adolescent caretakers had only completed primary school and the younger were lagging behind the expected grade for their age. In the sibling caretaker group this was perceived as one of most problematic issues.

In comparing the caretakers (Paper I-III) with the children in our cross-sectional study (Paper IV) we can conclude that they share this problematic situation. The individual reasons for dropping out of school may vary, but working children are known to drop out more often than others. In 2002 it was estimated that 52% of working children did not attend school (IPEC, 2002). It has been shown that formal education of girls is an important factor in preventing adolescent pregnancies, also when they are living in a poor household (Zelaya Blandón, 1999).

The level of repetition provides an indication of the quality and also the internal efficiency of a given education system (Miron, 1994). The results from our study indicate that there is a constant in- and outflow of children in school. Starting and quitting school is ongoing all through the grades by children of all ages. The impact this situation has for the quality of the education is apparent. For years, the maintenance of schools have been neglected, teachers underpaid, classes crowded and there has been costs and fees for parents to pay. However, the participants in our study clearly stated that they wanted to study although they were aware of the poor conditions offered in school. The proverb ‘to be successful in life’ (‘salir adelante en la vida’) was repeatedly mentioned by our caretakers and to achieve success they meant attending school and having an
education. In a short-time perspective children may opt to leave school for work and find it a rationale decision, but the norms among the participants in our study were that this decision was required by circumstances, not by free will.

On the ‘World Day for the eradication of child work’ in 2008, Nicaragua’s National Assembly adopted a new strategy affirming that ‘Education is the correct answer to child work/labour’\(^2\) It reinforces that the minimum age for someone to work is 14 years, and consequently it is now forbidden for anyone younger than that to work. The declaration continues to guarantee the protection of working adolescents against all forms of exploitation and to eradicate the domestic child labour.

As presented in Paper IV, the acknowledged strong connection between health and education is discussed by Freudenberg and Ruglis (Freudenberg and Ruglis, 2007). They suggest reframing school dropout as a health issue and to put reducing high school dropout rates on the public health agenda. They advocate, for example, coordinated school health programs that may include nutritional services such as free breakfasts, health education and health promotion. School-based health clinics including counselling services are also proposed to be included in the curriculum. In Paper IV we argue that this perspective, linking education and health, can also prove constructive in Nicaragua and suggesting measures to reduce them. Since poverty is the most important risk factor for having schooling gaps, a joint effort from education and health authorities to offer more than just teaching within schools can pave the way for a change so that school attendance becomes a priority for disadvantaged families.

**Short term winners – long term losers**

The caretakers told us that they felt confident being in charge of their younger siblings and in keeping the house. Despite having had negative experiences when caretaking, only a few of them complained about their responsibilities. They were proud to be independent and able to fend for themselves.

However, some of our concerns were confirmed in that children, who are home alone, are vulnerable and neglected by society. The risk of abuse was often mentioned by adult informants. We heard of mothers who locked up their children inside the house while working to prevent intruders from abusing their children. It was also evident that the siblings in care were at risk of maltreatment since the children were without adult supervision, for example, in case of illnesses or accidents when a quick decision of action was needed.

\(^2\) Declaración A.N.No 003-2008
In Paper I, we propose that the children in our study were socially excluded, both as individuals and as belonging to families whose position in society are weak. Staying at home with little involvement in community life makes them almost invisible in society at large. Street children are sometimes at an advantage compared to children at home. They have more freedom to use the money they earn and / or are given food from people they encounter.

The social exclusion leads to higher rates of poverty among affected groups (DFID, 2005). The daily survival strategies limit the choices and options that people have, and make long-term planning for the future almost impossible. Although many share the same situation, solutions for problems in every day life remain for the most part with the individual.

In Paper II, we discuss the activity “Who matters?” that engaged the sibling caretaker group. It provided them with an opportunity to reflect in a very concrete way over their relations with family and friends. When they created socio-metric charts of their social networks we found in particular that the role of fathers was complicated. It was revealed that those not living with their fathers (5) had very little contact with them and the fathers were not included in the circle of close relationships. Also for those living with their fathers (4) the relations were not considered close or supportive. The accounts of lack of close friends were also mirrored in the charts, as were the close bonds to their mothers and siblings. Grandmothers and other relatives were other important persons to the carers. They also agreed on the importance of showing mutual respect within the families. They all said that they had few true friends, and that work interfered with the possibilities of spending time with them. Classmates were not the same as friends since they did not show understanding of the carers’ situation. We found that they shared these views with the caretakers interviewed in Paper I.

Methodological considerations

Our effort to involve the caretakers in the research process increased their awareness about their own capacities and skills. Through our project they were able to reflect and share experiences with others in a similar situation. Shier has elaborated a model of pathways for children’s participation where he discusses the different possibilities of involving children (Shier, 2001). The optimum would be to have the children sharing power and responsibility for decision making, but this study did not aim for that. We wanted to create an understanding of the everyday lives of sibling caretakers where the children’s views are taken into account.

The mixed competences in the research team gave new insights to our perspectives of sibling caretaking. In the research process we became aware of
our different pre-understandings of the phenomenon and we came to agree that caretakers should be identified as working children, and that this kind of child work could be acknowledged as meaningful and important.

Limitations of the study

The study was conducted in an urban setting, and the findings both from the quantitative and the qualitative research may make generalizations to a rural setting difficult.

Since the main focus were on the caretakers we did not include the siblings’ experiences, nor did we study sibling interaction in deep.

The interview situations may have caused some of the children to be less open about sensitive issues such as abuse. The complexity of balancing power relations when visiting the children in their homes and the concerns to make the participants feel at ease could have prevented some children from disclosing secrets. One-to-one interviews may have alleviated that problem. Even if we referred some of the young people to counselling services, we did not follow up on what problems they wanted to consult about.
Conclusions

The overall emotion expressed by the sibling caretakers was pride, even if their situation often was characterized by stress and coping problems. In a Nicaraguan context, they play an important role in their families and in society at large. The traditional ways of shared management care of children has been put out of place and the pattern of households composed of extended families has been replaced by households headed by single women. Children are home alone without adult supervision, exposing them to a different and often harsh reality.

Even if many of these children achieve essential life skills as caretakers, they are at risk of falling behind as times pass by and they grow older. Their long-term personal development is likely to be hampered by the obligations they have as caretakers, especially when it influences their school attendance. From a societal point of view, caretaking may have negative consequences. For children who are already socially marginalised it will limit their access to basic education further adding the overall low educational level among people in Nicaragua.

The experiences from this study on sibling caretaking show that although caretakers are willing to take the responsibilities for their siblings, they need support from their communities and the society to be able to execute their rights as declared in the UNCRC. While the structuring conditions leading to sibling caretaking may be difficult to change, the awareness of how these can affect some individual children might make way for improvements in terms of access to school education and support from the society, such as flexible solutions to meet their particular needs in accessing higher education and/or vocational training. In addition it gives room for changes and interventions suggested by the children themselves. Most importantly, sibling caretakers deserve recognition and respect for their contributions to their families livelihood and survival.

From our experiences gained in this research, we suggest to further involve children and young people in Public Health research, also when designing intervention programs. Children are competent informants and actors and can be engaged in all parts of the research process. In the Nicaraguan setting there is considerable experience already, but refinement and development of new participatory methods are still needed.
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My project can be described in qualitative terms as a ‘prolonged engagement’. It has been going on for quite a number of years and I have spent rather a lot of time in Nicaragua. I still find it tricky to tell a joke in Spanish, but I will at least try:

‘Espero no haberme hecho la sueca mientras realizaba la investigación.’

La Sueca más Nica’
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Appendix 1

Questions used in the interviews with individual caretakers

- Can you tell me your name and your age?
- How many brothers and sisters do you have?
- What are their names and age?
- Are you looking after them when your mother is away?
- Do you and your siblings go to school?
- In what grade are you?
- What have your mother told you to do when you are alone in the house?
- Would you like to show me your house?
- **What did you do yesterday? (main question)**
  - (When did you wake up, what did you do then? Did you eat? Had your mother already left?)
  - Can you tell me about an occasion when your sibling has hurt herself? What happened, what did you do? Did someone help you?
  - Can you tell me about an occasion when your sibling was ill? What happened, what did you do? Did someone help you?
  - Can you tell me about an occasion when your sibling was bitten by an insect/animal? What happened, what did you do? Did someone help you?
  - Who has taught you what to do if something is happens in the house?
  - If your siblings are ill – how do you know what to do?
  - When your mother is away – do you eat? Or do you wait till she comes home?
  - Can you cook?
  - Are you allowed to cook when you are alone?
  - Does your mother come home every evening?
  - For how long time are you alone every day?
  - Do you know where your parents are when they are out of the house?
  - Why are you left alone to look after your siblings?
  - Who has taught you to look after your siblings?
  - What do you prefer to eat / cook?
  - What do you want to do when you are grown up?
  - What do you think about our visit to your house?
Appendix 2

Children's protocol for participatory research

Introduction and outline
The protocol comprises semi-structured activities and games focusing on key themes in children's lives. They are used as resources for group work. Many are based around locally-produced picture-cards which participants are asked to compare, sort and rank, yielding a combination of individual and group responses. In brief the activities are:

Activity 1  My Day invites young people to describe their daily lives, orally and using drawings and mapping techniques.
Activity 2  My Work explores the circumstances of children's work and the detail of the activities they undertake.
Activity 3  Who matters? asks about young people's social networks, the quality of key relationships, as well as their own self-evaluation.
Activity 4  Work and school asks participants what they consider are the bad as well as the good things about their work, and the repeats the activity for school, before establishing which is their preference.
Activity 5  Which work is best? asks participants to rank children's occupations (including their own) on terms of relative desirability/undesirability, and explores the criteria on which young people base these judgements.
Activity 6  What is a child? examines young people's own views on child development. They are asked to chart a wide range of work activities in terms of age-appropriateness.
Activity 7  What if? presents young people with common dilemmas facing working children and invites them to comment about what is likely to happen next and what could be done to help.
Activity 8  Life-stories provides investigators with an opportunity to explore the issues in Activity 1-7 with a particular child, in order to enrich the level of detail provided from group work.

The activities are divided into themes where the children – in groups – are asked to describe, orally or using drawing and mapping techniques. Group work is preferred in these activities as experience has shown that it is less threatening to the children than one-to-one interviews. However, life-stories of particular children can be used in addition to enrich the level of details provided from the group work.

Dice un popular refrán nicaragüense que “el trabajo de los niños es poco, y el que no lo aprovecha es un loco”. Con esta filosofía y con el creciente impacto de la migración económica de hombres y mujeres, el trabajo de cuidar niños y niñas esta queda bajo la responsabilidad de las abuelas, o de las hermanas que no pasan de los 15 años. Un estudio cualitativo sobre las circunstancias en que se desarrolló esta actividad fue realizado por Kjerstin Dahlblom, investigadora de la universidad Umeå en Suecia.

Uno de las novedades de la investigación es que se toma como sujeto de la investigación a las propias niñas, de manera que los resultados organizan las auto representaciones de las mismas. La investigadora encontró que a pesar de la dureza del trabajo las niñas, el sentimiento dominante por parte de ellas es el de orgullo por el apoyo que brindan a sus familias, y la satisfacción de sentirse útiles y necesitadas.

Un día ordinario en la vida de una niña que cuida de sus hermanos, implica una jornada apretada que incluye, limpiar la casa, cocinar, bañar los hermanos, asistir a clases y realizar tareas escolares. Kjerstin observa que balancear estas actividades implica mucho stress y requiere de habilidades organizativas y capacidad de tomar decisiones.

Según una de las niñas participantes en el estudio, ella tiene un “trabajo duro” desde que se levanta tiene que hacer y desayuno a sus sobrinos, los siente a ver televisión hasta que termina de cocinar que es ya a la mitad de la mañana, y luego los baña, los alimenta y los envía a clases. Luego se hace sus tareas escolares y cuida de que el sobrino de cinco años le ayude a barrer, su tarde termina con la limpieza de la casa y la preparación de las camas.

En otros países, especialmente en los desarrollados, el cuído de niños y niñas corresponde a las madres, o a otras personas adultas. La investigadora cita, no obstante que ya desde 1971 una encuesta realizada en 186 países encontró que en el 80 por ciento de estos la responsabilidad por el cuidado de la niñez recaía en las madres.

En trabajo infantil en general no es asunto extraño en Nicaragua. La investigadora apunta que casi la mitad de la población nicaragüense, unos dos millones de personas son menores de 15 años. En estas circunstancias, según estadísticas del año 2006, muestran que un 18 por ciento de nicaragüense de todos los niños y niñas nicaragüenses entre 5 y 17 años desarrolla algún tipo de trabajo productivo.

Sobre los efectos del trabajo infantil, Kjerstin indica el abandono de la escuela. Otros estudios como uno realizado por el programa IPEC, de la organización Internacional del Trabajo realizada en 2002 encontró que el cansancio es el principal factor para que los niños y niñas trabajadores abandonen la escuela. Ellos y ellas empiezan a bajar calificaciones, y a aplazar el año, hasta que el sistema los sacar después de muchas repeticiones o ellos mismos se retiran por frustración.

En las autovaloraciones recogidas en la investigación, algunas niñas se identifican con el rol de madres. Un aspecto a explorar a partir de estos resultados es la relación entre esta temprana socialización en la crianza y el elevado índice de embarazos en niñas y adolescentes que sufre el país.

La investigadora reconoce que las y los niños que cuidan hermanos, tienen poco espacio para negociar, sobrevivir es duro en Nicaragua, y lo poco que pueden hacer es obedecer y cumplir las tareas que les encomiendan.

Mientras tanto corresponde al Estado nicaragüense realizar acciones concretas tanto para cumplir compromisos internacionales para referentes a la protección de la niñez, como con los Objetivos del Milenio. Esto por supuesto pasa por crear fuentes de trabajo.
UNCRC summary

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Articles of special relevance for this study

Article 1 - A child means every human being below the age of eighteen years of unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.

Article 7 - The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents.

The registration of child's birth enables that child to obtain a birth certificate.

Article 18 - Parental responsibilities. Parents have joint primary responsibility for raising the child, and the State shall support them in this.

Article 19 - Protection from abuse and neglect. The State shall protect the child from all forms of maltreatment by parents or other responsible for the care of the child and establish appropriate social programmes for the prevention of abuse.

Article 24 - Health and health services. The child has a right to the highest standard of health and medical care attainable.

Article 28 - Education. The child has a right to education, and the State's duty is to ensure that primary education is free and compulsory, to encourage different forms of secondary education accessible to every child and to make higher education available to all on the basis of capacity. School discipline shall be consistent with the child's rights and dignity.

Article 32 - Child labour. The child has the right to be protected from work that threatens his or her health, education or development. The State shall set minimum ages for employment and regulate working conditions. (in Nicaragua 14 years)

Article 31 - Leisure, recreation and cultural activities. The child has the right to leisure, play and participation in cultural and artistic activities.
Nicaragua, país de Lagos y Volcanes.

Aquí se representa el medioambiente de Nicaragua, sus Lagos y volcanes que representan la belleza de variedades de animales acuáticos, como por ejemplo peces, cañas, rayas, ballenas, etc.