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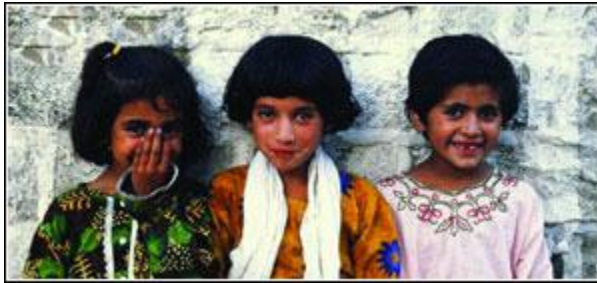
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Children's hopes and fears

By Dr. Bernadette L. Dean and Shazia Solangi



MANY countries including Pakistan are grappling with how best to educate children to face 21st century challenges. Globalisation and the extensive use of information and communication technology (ICT) have opened up possibilities for creating a better world for all; however, they have simultaneously resulted in increased global conflicts, social injustice and environmental

destruction.

These issues are of serious concern for all people and must be resolved by humankind as a whole. Education is thought to be the most effective tool in understanding and dealing positively with such issues as it equips children with the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions. Education however, often prepares children as future citizens rather than accepting them as citizens now, with interests and concerns about the present as well as the future, and a desire to make the world a better place. Thus children's voices are generally absent in decision-making regarding the kind of education they need to receive.

To find out the images our children have of the future, the roles they play now and anticipate playing, and how they think schools can prepare them to act responsibly, a study was conducted with class five children (10 to 14 years old) from government and private schools of Karachi. A questionnaire was administered to 178 students (89 girls and 89 boys) from both school systems, consisting of three parts.

The first asked children to share three main hopes and fears related to their personal future, the future of their local area, and the future of the world. The second part had children identify their degree of concern regarding social issues such as violence, prejudice, environment, poverty, health and unemployment on a five-point rating scale. The last section asked children about their involvement in social organisations, learning about local and global issues at school and their possible role as citizens in the future.

To clarify the data, a small group of children from each class was asked to ‘elaborate’ on their responses to the questionnaire in an interview.

Hopes for the future

The data shows that the most significant personal hope of all the children was for employment. Children from all schools want to acquire high status jobs with most wanting to become doctors. Private school girls and boys also aspired to be engineers, pilots, army officers and lawyers. While most boys in government schools shared these aspirations, most girls wanted to become teachers.

The second personal hope of the children from government schools was to become fluent in the English language, to get good results in their exams and to go to university. While private school children hoped to be able to help those in need by constructing hospitals, providing free treatment to poor patients and building more schools. The third personal hope of children from government schools was to be able to help those less fortunate than themselves; children from private schools hoped to live a happy and comfortable life, to travel abroad, live in material comfort and have a happy family.

The data indicates that private school children know the likelihood of their entering high status and well-paying professions that will enable them to live comfortably as well as help others. Children from the government schools on the other hand realise that in order to gain high status professions, they need to be fluent in English and receive higher education. Present societal realities had government school girls aspire only to become teachers, as this half day job, would allow them to care for their families and do household chores as well. The children from the government schools also wanted to help those less fortunate but on a smaller scale and through personal ways such as caring for them and sharing their grief.

The three hopes for the future of their local area (Karachi in general and their neighbourhood in particular) were common for all children. Their most important hope was for people to receive their social rights — the right to education, health, employment, and basic facilities such as good roads and clean drinking water. The second hope was for a better physical environment particularly, nice and clean neighbourhoods with less pollution, good drainage systems and big parks for children to play in. The third hope was for peace and prosperity in their locality.

Pakistan has large socio-economic class differences with the upper class enjoying the best quality of life by far. The middle- and working-class — from which many of the children came — have a lower standard of living. The children could see these differences and wanted an improved quality of life for themselves, which they felt they could achieve if they received their social rights, and a healthy environment.

Although all the children wanted peace, their responses revealed different notions of peace. Private school children hoped for the absence of violence, crime and lawlessness, whereas children from government schools emphasised the need to create peace through developing good relationships within local communities. This shows that children from government schools had an active notion of peace: that is, dealing with issues that are root causes of violence, and

promoting peaceful alternatives; whereas children from private schools had passive notions of peace that is peace as in the absence of war.

Children's hopes for the world were similar to their hopes for the local area. Their primary hope was for Justice and peace in the world. Children from government schools emphasised the need to decrease terrorism, crime and violence, whereas children from private schools wished for an end to all wars so that the world would become a better place to live in. The second hope was for people to attain their social rights. The children desired a world with less poverty and ample opportunities for education and employment. All the children hoped for the development of good relations among different countries. A girl aged 13, said: 'I want the resolution of the Kashmir issue, I want to see the independence of Kashmir, so we can live a prosperous life'. A boy said: 'I hope that the entire world will be friendly with each other'.

The children's hopes were not simply wishful thinking but were based on reality. Government school children were aware that they did not have the same chances in life as privileged private school children do and would therefore have to do more to realise their hopes.

Fears for the future

The three personal fears of all the children were the same. Their greatest fear was of war, violence and crime, followed by fear of failure and fear of natural disasters. Again, differences in responses were noted from the two education systems: private school children feared the repercussions of global violence, whereas government school children feared the consequences of violence locally. Information and communication technologies have brought news of war, violence and crime from Pakistan and the world into every home. In Karachi, cases of car and mobile phone snatching and armed robberies are reported daily. Children are therefore well aware of the increase in violence within and beyond Pakistan and thus expressed the fear that they might personally become victims of crime, violence or war.

The children also feared failing their exams, not getting a good job and not succeeding in their careers. These fears were voiced more by children from government schools. The poor quality of education in government schools, growing unemployment and lack of a merit-based promotion system may have given rise to these personal fears.

The Tsunami that hit Southeast Asia in 2004 and the earthquake that shook northern Pakistan in 2005, have led children to fear death and destruction from such catastrophes. Greater than the fear of dying or losing their family in an earthquake was the concern about life following an earthquake. Reports of poor crisis management and problems with reconstruction may have contributed to these fears.

The three fears for the local area and the world were the same. The greatest fear was of crime, violence and war, followed by fear of environmental degradation, and fear of a decline in the quality of their life. Children felt insecure due to increased sectarianism in their local area and the rise of terrorism at the global level. They were afraid that there would be another world war, which would destroy the world. They felt that nothing was being done to address the causative factors of war. Children were also aware of the tension between Muslim countries and America and wanted both to make serious efforts to prevent war.

All children feared environmental degradation, in that 'Parks will decrease and garbage will increase'. Children of government schools feared that smoke and effluence of factories situated near their homes would increase air and land pollution and severely damage their health. Increased frequency of environmental catastrophes such as earthquakes, tsunamis and floods due to environmental pollution was a feared future of the world.

The children also predicted a worsening of their quality of life. They foresaw an erosion of their rights such as the right to education and to facilities such as water, electricity and sewage disposal; and increased poverty, unemployment, disease and death for greater numbers of people the world over.

The fears expressed also demonstrate that children are well aware of what is happening around them. They recognise that their quality of life is deteriorating due to increased crime, violence and war, a lack of social rights and environmental pollution. Children's fears about their own lives were reflected in their fears for the well-being of their local community as well as for people across the world. They were aware that the provision of rights could improve their life chances and concerted efforts by all could prevent war and environmental pollution. They also recognised that the situation was worsening because of inaction at personal, local and global levels.

Taking action to create a better world

Children were asked if there was anything they could do to make the world a better place, the importance of learning about local and global issues at school, and what they were doing themselves and at school to bring about a positive change in their local areas as well as the world. Most children believed that they could contribute towards making the world a better place. Interestingly, most government school children felt that they could do a lot, while most private school children felt they could only do a little to make the world a better place. Only 7 per cent felt they could do nothing. The children observed they had learned very little about local and global issues at school and were of the view that it should be part of the school curriculum. With respect to personal contribution towards improvement, all government school students reported a lack of involvement, while only 24 out of 89 private school students reported having done something thus far. One student helped needy people, one was a member of a social welfare organization, six donated to different social causes and sixteen children kept the environment clean. The children seem to have received more opportunity to take social actions at school than personally. The nature of activities in both school systems were similar, providing children opportunities to make donations and raise funds in aid of the earthquake and tsunami victims, and for helping to keep their environment clean. All the children noted that opportunities for social actions in school were exceptional events rather than recurring activities.

The findings of this research indicate that children are well aware of social and political issues of their own society and the world, and that the children while very hopeful about the future recognise there are obstacles to realising this hoped-for future. Children were still generally optimistic about the future, exhibiting a great zeal to overcome the problems, so as to make the world a place where everyone can live a good life in peace and harmony.

A central task of education is to prepare children for life. Schools must provide children opportunities to develop their potential and prepare them to fulfill life's various responsibilities. Most Pakistani schools, however, focus on teaching the textbook to prepare students to pass their examinations. The opportunities for involving students in meaningful curricula and co-curricular activities that would develop their potential and prepare them as informed and active citizens are generally ignored in all schools and especially in government schools.

If schools are to develop informed and responsible citizens who would act to improve their society and the world, citizenship education must become a key goal of education in Pakistan. This means that schools must prepare children with the knowledge, skills and dispositions required for citizenship. The curriculum must include not only what adults think to be important but also children's and young people's concern about themselves and their world. The children should also be provided opportunities to learn about local and global issues such as war and peace, environmental pollution, and sustainable development; acquire skills such as information-gathering and processing, critical thinking and communication; and dispositions to promoting equality, justice and peace. They should also be provided opportunities to take informed and responsible actions so as to make a contribution to improving their schools and their communities, to realise their hopes for a bright and prosperous future for themselves, their local area and the world.