Children's Concerns: Voices from Spain - children´s hopes and fears for their future

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Abstract

This study identifies children's hopes and fears for the future and the role of education in Spain, and in particular children in Pamplona. While they feared failure in social and/or professional terms, they were more optimistic about the alleviation of poverty and unemployment than children in other countries. They did have greater concerns about the environment.

The Sample

The Spanish sample is made up of 150 schoolchildren in their fifth year of primary school; they are aged between 10 and 11.We chose a sample of mixed (boys and girls) and single-sex schools, all of which are independent state-funded schools. The children who attend these schools belong to different socio-cultural levels in Pamplona. A fifth primary classroom was also chosen at random in each school, and the questionnaire was given to each of the pupils.

The schools may be described as follows:

- Two coeducational schools with a medium socio-cultural level, situated in the centre of the city (82 pupils)
- One boys' school with an upper-middle socio-cultural level, located in the suburbs (22 pupils)
- One girls' school with an upper-middle socio-cultural level, located in a residential area outside the city (pupils)
- One boys' school with a low socio-cultural level in the suburbs (20 pupils).

Findings

Personal futures

For the Spanish schoolchildren, the three main personal hopes for the future are:

1. The **sociability** of the human person is already manifest at 10 years of age, according to this survey; the strongest desires of this childhood population are focused on human relations (56%): friendship, parenthood, the company of others. And within these categories, the most important, with a notable difference, was the family relationship: forming a family and having children is the goal most desired, much higher than friendship. Both girls and boys coincide in this, although girls seem to prioritise relationships (69%) over job aspirations (44%), while the reverse is true for the boys: job aspirations, 51% and relationships, 46%.

2. **Professional aspirations** rank second as a focus for hopes, but the gender difference here is quite notable.

3. The third most frequently expressed hope referred to **material goods**: having money, possessions, and entertainment. This was considerably more patent amongst the girls (44%) than the boys (26%), although the number of girls who aspire to owning a pet influences this. No girl showed a desire to have a car or motorcycle, while the boys occasionally even indicated the brand they wished to own.

Health did not seem to be a great concern at 10 years of age (13%), nor did education (7%) appear in a noticeable way.

Regarding their main personal fears about the future:

The main worry for these children is **social and professional failure**, and in particular, not being able to find **employment** in the future (57%). It is surprising that at these ages, the children are already looking forward to having a source of income.

For girls personal fears regarding relationships (80%) are the greatest concern, considerably more so than for boys (28%). This is a constant, as shown by responses to earlier questions. Within this general issue, the most frequent worry is that a member of the family would die. Several girls noted worries about not having children, a topic not mentioned by the boys.

Boys have a greater fear about being a victim (37%) than girls (30%) while girls seem to have more fears concerning their health (33%) than boys (22%). Health is not a major issue yet. Girls fear dying early, which is not an issue for the boys, who instead worry about becoming ill.

When asked if their life in the future will be better or worse than it is today:

*   Spanish children were optimistic about their future: 38% of the analysed sample believed that their life will be 'much better' than today, and 39% said that it will be 'a bit better'. Only 10% of the children stated that they believed their lives will be 'a little worse' and only 4% said 'much worse'.
*   The girls were more optimistic than the boys, since only 8% of the girls stated that they believed their future would be 'worse' while among boys this percentage was 19%.

Local futures

The Spanish schoolchildren state that their three main hopes for the future of your locality are:

1. **Conservation and improvement of the environment** is the top hope for the future of their locality, and specifically the elimination of pollution. While it is the area of

greatest hope for boys and girls, considerably more girls (72%) than boys (46%) consider that this is an issue.

2.   Girls were more likely to focus their hopes on **community relations** than **crime and violence**, while the reverse was true for the boys.

3.   These Spanish children hope for the **disappearance of poverty**, although this hope was expressed by a greater percentage of boys than girls.

These top four desires were the most important by far, since other options, such as health or transport were not mentioned by a high proportion of the children in the sample.

In the section on services and quality of life, girls desired good government, education and employment, issues which the boys did not mention; they instead focused on sports events and an increase in sweet shops.

Their main fears for locality are:

Both boys (55%) and girls (69%) feared **violence and crime** in the local area, much more than other threats. Threats were not generally specified, but there were many references to war and terrorism.

The **environment** and **community** issues were also cause for concern. Girls were more concerned about the environment than about community issues, with the reverse being true for the boys, the strength of girls' opinion however, regarding both these issues was greater than for the boys.

When asked about the future of the inhabitants of their city, the children were nearly as optimistic as when asked about their own lives: for 80% of the girls, the future will be 'better', and for 72% of the boys. Only 13%, both for boys and girls, stated that the future would be 'worse'.

On asking the children whether their city would become be more or less violent, they once again responded optimistically: 51% of boys and 53% of girls stated that their city would be 'less violent' and only 19% and 8%, respectively, responded 'more violent'.

These students also believe that in the future there will be less unemployment in their city: 53% of boys and 58% of girls. However, in the sample an important segment of children also believed that it would be greater: 30% in the case of boys and 25% of the girls.

In relation to both racism and prejudice the Spanish students were optimistic. 61% of the girls and 56% of the boys considered that in their city there would be 'less prejudice and racism'. The boys, in this case, were more optimistic, since in addition to this percentage, another 25% stated that prejudice would remain 'the same' and only 17% stated 'more', whereas 23% of the girls believed that there would be more.

With regard to environmental problems, there appear to be greater differences in opinion. 45% of boys and 50% of girls believe there will be fewer environmental problems, compared to 37% and 31%, respectively, of those who believe the opposite.

74% of boys and 69% of girls believe clearly believe that there will be 'less poverty'.

It was also clear that for these pupils, both boys and girls, the people of their city would live a healthier life (70% of both boys and girls).

Global futures

When asked about the future of the planet, the children gave the following as their three main hopes:

1. **Peace** is at the heart of their hopes. It did not appear among hopes for the individual person or the local community, since it seemingly does not affect these levels. Now, however, it is a major desire for the world at large. Nevertheless, there are differences between boys and girls. For boys (52%), it is the most important desire, while for girls (44%) it is in third place.

2. For girls the greatest concern is **relationships** (75%), while there is a difference between girls and boys (35%) in relation to this issue.

3. **Poverty** is a cause for concern for both boys (43%) and girls (62%).

These desires were closely followed by those already seen: the environment, crime and violence, peaceful coexistence between boys and girls, with one difference: several girls indicated their interest in caring for animals, making sure that there no are no abandoned animals, preventing extinction of endangered species, etc.; but no boy seemed to be worried about animals, nor do they mention them. Some girls mention gender abuse among types of violence, which was not mentioned by boys. Is this an influence of the news on television, where the abused victim is always a woman?

Their three main fears for the future of the world are:

War is by far the greatest cause for concern, both for boys (44%) and for girls (50%).

Girls appear especially worried about **global poverty** (41%), while boys are more concerned about **natural disasters** (32%).

Girls (33%) seem very much more concerned about crime and violence than boys (14%).

With regard to the future of the people of the world, our children are somewhat less optimistic. 72% of girls and 67% of boys believed that the future of the world would be 'better'. On the other hand, the number of students who believe that the future for the world inhabitants would be 'worse' is 17% for girls, and 22% for boys.

On the subject of violence in the world, the results are different. It is no longer so clear that the children believe that the world will be less violent, since 30% of the children believe the opposite, and 22% that there will be no change. In the case of girls, 53% believe that there will be less violence or the same amount (30%), and only 17% believe there will be more.

With regard to prejudice and racism in the world, both girls and boys believe there will be less (55% and 42% respectively), although this point is not so clear in the case of the boys, since 33% believed that there would be the same amount and 24% believed there will be more prejudice and racism in the world.

There is a clear division in opinion concerning environmental problems. The same number of boys (41%) believes that there will be 'more environmental problems' as those who believed there would be fewer, with 19% holding a middle-range opinion. In the case of the girls, the most frequent opinion was that there would be 'fewer environmental problems' (53%).

Concerning poverty, both boys and girls responded optimistically: 66% of boys and 56% of girls believed that there would be 'less poverty' in the world.

Here also the students were optimistic when asked about the lifestyle of the world population: 70% of the boys and 69% of the girls affirmed that people would live a 'healthier life'.

Action for change

The question of whether they were involved in any local or national organizations, which deal with creating a better future, e.g. Friends of the Earth, Oxfam, Amnesty International.

The response does not add up to the total sample, for the following reasons:

- The majority of both boys and girls clearly answered no.
- Many others answered by referring to their parents: 'Yes, my father belongs or we are members of… or we have sponsored…'
- They also answered concerning campaigns and school activities mentioned in question 26.

However the majority of the students believed that they could contribute to making the world a better place: 94% of the boys and 95% of the girls stated this. This result is moderated by the fact that 72% of the boys and 78% of the girls believed they could contribute 'a little'. It is noteworthy that among these two groups, there was a small percentage (6% and 5% respectively) who believed that they could not contribute 'anything' to improve the world.

The following is what these schoolchildren do to help improve their city and the world.

The percentage of boys and girls coincides in the types of daily activities that will help to improve their city. First, those related to the environment; second, campaigns for achieving certain goals; and, in third place, relations with others.

However, in this last group, there is a notable difference in percentages. Human relations are valued by 12% of the boys, while the girls showed double the interest, up to 26%. This feminine quality of welcoming and caring for people is also manifest in work-related questions.

With regard to the environment, the children were most concerned about maintaining the streets clean and using litterbins.

The most frequently mentioned campaigns were also the simplest: collecting money and food.

Girls are more likely to consider that they have learned 'a lot' about global issues at school: 67% as opposed to 50% of boys. While this is an important issue, nevertheless 44% of the boys said that it contributed 'little' and 5% 'nothing'. These percentages are lower in the case of the girls.

There is no doubt that the children see education on global issues as being important at school. For 88% of boys and 94% of girls this is 'very important' and only 9% of boys and 6% of girls stated that this issue was of 'average importance'. Of the 150 total students, only 2 stated that it was of 'little' importance that the topic was taught at school.

All participants were involved in the issues mentioned, and coincide closely in their responses.

Activities and Campaigns

The majority of students participate in:

1 - Food collection campaigns: action against hunger, race against hunger, solidarity crèche
2 - Funding drives: DOMUND
3 - Campaigns for the collection of toys, clothes and school material

Global issues

In all schools surveyed, the students participated in debates and commentaries on the news concerning world development, cultural differences, women's rights, natural catastrophes, global warming, immigration and the environment.

Beliefs and values

In all schools surveyed, the students participated in debates and commentaries on the news concerning world peace, family, poverty, racism and multiculturalism.

Summary and discussion of implications for our country

The study reflects that the principal fear for 57% of these 10-year-olds is not being successful and not finding employment. Among other facts, we can conclude that 56% of the children believe that human interaction, friendship, company or family relations are of great importance, whereas health only concerns 27% of the group. They would like to have a family, and 33% want for money and other material goods. 75% of the sample group believe that their personal life will be 'better' than at present, compared to 9% who believe it will be a 'little worse', and 4%, 'much worse'.

The study also shows the children's viewpoint of the world. They consider that the principal problems are war (47%), natural disasters (31%) and poverty (30%), although 69% thinks that the future for the people of the world will be 'better' in the future. Amongst other facts, 46% believe that environmental problems will diminish, 62% that there will be less poverty, and 69% state that life will be 'healthier'. However, 25% consider that there will be a rise in violence, and 52% think that racism will remain at the same levels or even rise.

The data show the importance of action in education, not only in formal or institutional areas, but also in other non-formal ones. Among the latter we must emphasise the role of the family, of family relations.

It seems to us that the family is the natural area where we learn to be a person, with relationships with those who are close to us, and later be open to other relationships with other people who are more distant (cfr. Myers-Walls and Somlai, 2001; Colomina, 2001; Beck-Gernsheim, 2003; Alonso y Román, 2003; Naval, 2005).

Suitable conditions for educational action are found in the family because: a) family relations are based on parent-child affection, which is indispensable for respect and acceptance; b) the family can carry out a continued, coherent action during the different stages of children's development, which allows the aims of education to be met; c) living a shared family life offers many opportunities for educational action, which is strengthened by the example of the parents and other adult relatives as personal experience reinforces the proposed principles and norms; and d) the family has complete social backing in its task of bringing up children; it outlines its own principles and uses whatever encouragement or sanctions are considered necessary (without omitting respect for personal dignity).

These conditions must be contemplated from a positive perspective, and we must remember that if anything is left out, it is the children who will be damaged.

Family relations are the cradle of human sociability, the root of that confidence we all, adults and children, need to live our dreams without fear, and be happy.

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