

## **Universal Education Foundation, Voice of Children Initiative:**

### **Launch meeting for the Pilot Survey**

**Held on the 2-3 February 2006, Le Royal Hotel, Amman, Jordan**

### **Meeting Report**

The meeting organized by the Universal Education Foundation, brought together about 20 representatives of education and ICT from government, business, non-government organizations and academic institutions for a two-day meeting in Amman (Jordan), for the launch of its Voice of Children Initiative and of the pilot study in Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon.

All the discussions were very rich and stimulating; the participants gave generously of their ideas and suggestions in a highly co-creative and committed spirit.

It was a consultative meeting to present the Universal Education Foundation and its pilot activity in the Middle East & North Africa region. Special emphasis was placed on the Voice of Children Initiative and on the pilot study. The meeting sought feedback from the participants on the concept, design, possible linkages with other initiatives in the three countries, as well as on the utilization and dissemination of the study findings. The aims of the meeting were that:

- The research design includes areas of focus and possible limitations are better understood.
- The government partners contribute to the design and planning phase, bring to the table country level inputs and considerations, and are willing to utilize research findings as policy input.
- The ICT partners are inspired by the initiative and are willing to engage in it, bringing their sector-specific interests.
- Creative ideas for the dissemination and advocacy process are obtained.
- The organizations implementing the study are well informed of the nature and terms of reference of the qualitative and quantitative components of the study.

This short report summarizes the main areas of discussion for each of the working sessions. The presentations introducing each session are listed and all presentations have also been disseminated with this report. A complete list of the participants is attached to the report with the agenda.

## **Session One: UEF's Vision and Main Program Areas**

*Presentation: UEF's vision and main program areas - Daniel Kropf and Marwan Awartani*

Following the presentation the following issues were discussed:

- Participants expressed strong support for:
  - The vision and values of the UEF emphasizing their commitment to the notion of 'Education by All' meaning that all sectors of society need to be involved in partnership. The UEF advocacy of a partnership of health and education with media and ICT received firm support.
  - Recognizing endeavors which promote well-being of children and young people and serve to inspire others, as opposed to giving awards.
  - Involving the decision-makers in countries in which the Voice of Children Initiative is implemented.
  - The importance of taking account of the fact that many young people spend a large amount of their time exposed to the media and ICTs which are, therefore, key sectors for the UEF.
  - Children's involvement was supported as fundamental to the values of the UEF. It is important to find the best ways to harness participation, given that informal feedback suggests that children often feel that they are not listened to, and thus not respected.
  - Children might judge for themselves what they consider well-being. Some children might have good communication skills (which are not measured in school) but bad math skills (which are measured in school), thus might feel bad. We need to consider which dimensions are measured in order to think beyond the traditional dimensions.
- It was suggested that the notion of 'freedom' could be added more specifically to the values of the UEF in order to underline the idea of freedom from pressures, freedom to be happy and to live harmoniously as well as freedom to ask questions and express feelings.
- Cultural understanding was felt to be essential, especially celebrating cultural diversity rather than imposing one model.
- It was recommended that UEF should not focus only on formal education, but also take into consideration non-formal education because of the role of communities.

- The discussion explored some of the links between well-being and quality education.

## **Session Two: The Voice of Children Initiative: the pilot study**

*Presentations:*

*Overall concept of Voice of Children Initiative - Marwan Awartani*

*Qualitative component, initial thinking - Mohammad Shaheen*

*Quantitative component, methodology - Faisal Awartani*

The following points were raised and discussed:

- Children's involvement: there was some discussion about how to involve children and young people in the design and content of the survey and also on the feasibility of their being involved in the data collection. This suggestion was based on an experience presented by one of the participants. It was agreed that the results of the survey would be communicated to children.
- Selection criteria for the sample included discussion about the age group to select for the pilot sample and whether or not to add a younger group of 10-11 year olds (4th graders). Previous qualitative research undertaken in the region suggested that the 7-10 year olds were talkative, engaged in discussion and expressed themselves well. The participants confirmed that the target group should be both boys and girls in single sex groups as well as mixed groups where feasible. The method of selecting young people for the focus groups and interviews was considered crucial in order to obtain a good cross-section. Surveys can have a tendency to select just the good students, UEF surveys will aim to listen to a range of students. As one participant said, the 'trouble-makers' are often eager to talk.
- The group felt that careful thought was needed in the design and analysis to make clear connections between the quantitative and the qualitative components.
- Formal and informal settings: Since it was felt that formal, school settings can limit children's freedom to speak their minds, it will be important to hold the focus groups and interviews in informal settings that do not involve teachers. One previous survey undertaken by one of the participating organizations on children's use of technology had allowed the respondents to write what they wanted in order to increase their freedom. Ensuring anonymity can equally help to obtain more insights. This could include, for example, respondents putting the questionnaire into a box rather than handing it to the facilitator.
- Methodology of the qualitative component: the discussion confirmed the thrust of the preparatory work, advising that the discussion guide should not be too structured and could start with broad questions. The participants discussed the merits of the different forms of recording focus group sessions.

- The fact that the organizations piloting the study all have a strong research background and very substantial experience were considered to be important criteria for ensuring that the research is based on the best international practice.
- Country specific questions/ Comparisons: It was agreed that there could be some country-specific questions as the external factors, e.g. in Palestine, are likely to have an impact on how the children and young people perceive their well-being. An issue was raised about cross-country comparisons and how to ensure that they are relevant and valid.

### **Session Three: Presentations by partners of related experiences and initiatives**

During this session the participant organizations presented related experiences and areas of their work which they felt would have synergies with the Voice of Children Initiative and overall with the work of the UEF.

*Presentations:*

*Child-Friendly Schools : a Palestinian experience - Basri Saleh*

*Previous research undertaken in Lebanon - Rabih Haber*

*The situation of the children TV programming in Lebanon - Rabih Haber*

*Cisco's prior involvement in voice of children research - Michelle Sellinger*

*EDC projects which have relevance for Voice of Children - Carmen Aldinger*

*AED - How can we change policy? - Hala Hoshan*

### **Session Four: Children's Participation. What are other ways to have children involved, besides the Voice of Children study?**

This session took the form of brain-storming, allowing the group to explore ideas and suggestions informally. The main ideas are summarized below.

- Representation of children and young people in the meetings and structure of the UEF: There was quite substantial discussion about the idea of setting up a "Shadow Children's Board" for UEF. Points raised included the idea of having regional boards rather than a global one, the need to create linking mechanisms between the different boards and clarify decision-making processes, the importance of including children from various countries (and not just English-speaking). There was an agreement that it will be important to find a way for children to choose themselves who will serve on the board(s).
- A concept note has already been developed by UEF for an interactive portal/web site focusing on children's well-being. Linking with existing websites for children and young people was suggested, such as the UNICEF initiative to launch a regional network called

“Arab Voices of Youth.” It would be possible to ask the latter for input on the Voice of Children indicators.

- Integrating the UEF approach so it can make a difference: Involving children and young people in taking an active role in shaping their learning environment should not be seen as external to mainstream activities in countries. The implication is that the buy-in of ministries of education is essential. The Voice of Children study has the potential to generate a lot of discussion in which teachers and policy-makers should be engaged. The links between advocacy and policy-dialogue are important.
- Participants felt that much useful synergy could be created by connecting with organizations and networks that have experience working with children and young people and by building on existing networks.
- One proposal focused on how to create the space for children and young people to be able to re-design the school curriculum. Though there was general agreement that this would be an excellent and far-reaching initiative, it was felt that it could face many barriers and children might lose trust if their proposal was not supported.
- Youth empowerment can need preparation, for example, students who have been in deprived situations tend to need preparation and orientation on how to take responsibility. Young people are often used as an ‘image’ but are in fact still invisible. The political, economic and social aspects will play a significant role concerning what can be done in each country.

## **Session Five: UEF Reflection on Education and Well-Being**

*Presentations:*

*UEF - Reflections on education and well-being - Daniel Kropf*

Following the presentations, the following issues were discussed:

- There was general agreement that children have different learning styles and it is very difficult for them to learn in school if they are bored, hungry, bullied, threatened, using alcohol and drugs, etc. The work of the UEF has to take into account of the background political, social and economic factors affecting the lives of children and young people in the different countries and regions where the Voice of Children Initiative will be implemented. It may therefore be useful for focus groups and interviews to start by asking a background question about how the children/young people feel before they come to school. It could be left up to the regional partners to decide as they know the local situation.
- Children as actors in the school environment: Children can impact the learning environment and can be actors in the school but how usual are activities that really

- Questions were raised concerning whether the surveys set out to measure the impact on learning as well as on well-being. On the other hand it was felt that since the survey should not take longer than 30 minutes, it was essential to be realistic about what could be included at this pilot stage. Different indicators could be taken up by successive surveys.
- The group considered that good communication with ministries of education about this initiative is highly important so that they realize its potential contributions to quality education in so far as improving well-being can connect to tangible outputs for learning. One way to make the link is by presenting solid arguments and studies that show the correlation between health and learning. Various resources were mentioned such as ‘Making the Connections: Health and Student Achievement’ by ASTHO (Association of State and Territorial Health Officials).
- ‘People behave as they are measured’: Well-being is far from being a main focus of education yet. In UEF’s vision the focus of ‘measurement’ will shift from placing high importance on academic achievement to focusing on the whole person and their well-being.
- Timing of the surveys may have an influence on the perceptions of children and young people about their well-being. For example, at the end of the school year, students might be fed up with school. The pilot surveys will have to be done by the end of April since schools in the region close late May.

## **Session Six: Indicators: Ideas for what questions to include**

The discussion focused on the preparatory document circulated before the meeting which presents a matrix approach to the indicators and includes a broad range of possible questions taking account of the five aspects of well-being (physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual).

*Organizing principles and design considerations for the surveys: presented by Mohammad Shaheen*

- It was suggested that the pilot study could take account of the physical appearance of students (size, weight, height) and even their perception of school uniforms in terms of how these aspects contribute to or impinge on their well-being.

- Autonomy and responsibility in school: it would be useful to explore the extent to which children are allowed to make choices, e.g., how the classroom is arranged, who sits where. Does this have an impact on well-being? Given that a lack of a sense of control is a major factor for disease, and healing takes place when a person takes control of their life, autonomy can play a crucial role in children's well-being. Respect is implied in giving children autonomy and decision-making responsibilities which can increase their self-esteem. In terms of the different social functions of school, as well as learning there is also the role of keeping children in a safe environment while parents work. It may be interesting to examine the relative autonomy they have during extra-curricula activities as opposed to in formal learning settings;
- The use of ICTs and internet will need to be examined both in school and in the home in terms of the types of technology used, access and availability, the tools available and used, etc. The uses made of mobile phones cannot be excluded. It was suggested that it would be interesting to 'map' schools with a view to situating where technology is available and accessed.
- An issue was raised about the different roles of different types of TV channels and, in particular, the educational channels. The relevance of what children read was discussed and the need to include comics.
- Indicators should include role models and influencing forces in order to explore who/what they are. What are the sources of inspiration for children? Are they in the community, the family? Does this differ by age? Children might be inspired by media influences, through the music they listen to (e.g., Arab or Western), the culture transmitted by the different types of TV channels, etc. Another issue is how to gauge media friendliness to children and the effects of media violence on them.
- A difficulty raised in the discussion was that of distinguishing spirituality from religion in the context of the Middle East as Arabic does not make the distinction. Therefore how to translate the notion of spirituality which refers to caring, to having a sense of purpose and a sense of joy.

## **Session Seven: Closing session**

The final session discussed and agreed the calendar leading up to the pilot research, for both the qualitative and quantitative surveys. It also discussed initiatives to engage stakeholders and to create synergies with other activities in the region, as follows:

- A meeting will be organized with the Ministry of Education in Palestine, with several stakeholders (media, ICT, ministry of social affairs, universities, NGOs, etc.), with the purpose of having a comprehensive discussion about the study and bringing in more stakeholders. The example was given of engaging civil partners in Education for All in

Palestine for which a National Forum was established with 15-20 key players from various institutions at national level and from UN agencies. These individuals were in positions that could ensure support for the study's recommendations.

- The suggestion of forming an advisory panel in the region was discussed. Its role could be to provide guidance, input and advice as well as serving as a link to other initiatives and for building advocacy. The panel would represent ICT, education, and media.
- There was a discussion on how to involve media in the region, for them to participate and feel ownership. There are a very large number of (satellite) channels in the region and the issue will be where to focus.
- A number of initiatives were suggested for possible synergy with the Voice of Children pilot study and more broadly with the UEF's vision and values, for example:
  - The Ruwwad project in Palestine which is developing a network of young people and works with youth organizations through the World Youth Forum.
  - UNICEF through their regional and local offices.
  - Some of the further suggestions for contacts: the Commonwealth of Learning, the WHO Regional Office, the Ford Foundation, the Wellcome Foundation, the Red Crescent, the Hannan Project, the Global Knowledge Partnership, the Jordan Education Initiative, "Taking it Global", etc.. (*We would be grateful if colleagues could send us suggestions which have not been included here.*)

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**ANNEXES-**  
**IV. List of Participants**

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## Meeting Agenda

### Voice of Children: Launch meeting for the Pilot Survey

2 - 3 February 2006, Le Royal Hotel, Amman

Wednesday 1 February	Arrival
19:30	Dinner at the Royal Hotel
Thursday 2 February	Day 1
Session One	Moderator: Jean Gordon
09:30 – 09:45	Welcome and statement of purpose
09:45 – 10:15	Introductions of participants
10:15 – 10:40	UEF's vision and main program areas
10:40 – 11:30	Discussion
11:30 – 11:45	Break
Session Two	Moderator: Marwan Awartani
11:45 – 11:55	Overall concept of Voice of Children surveys and the pilot
11:55- 12:05	Qualitative component
12:05 – 12:15	Quantitative component
12:15 – 13:30	Open discussion on the pilot and the research design
13:30 – 15:00	Lunch break
Session Three	Moderator: Sami Khasawneh
15:00 – 16:30	Presentation by partners and participants of experiences and initiatives related to the Voice of Children

16:30 – 16:45	Break
Session Four 16:45 – 17:15  17:15 – 18:30	Discussion of country inputs and children’s participation
19:15 – 21:00	Dinner
Friday 3 February	Day 2
Session One 09:00 – 10:45	Moderator: Jean Gordon  Framework for indicators on well being and learning environments
10:45 – 11:00	Break
Session Three 11:00 – 12:00	Moderator: Jean Gordon  Dissemination and advocacy plan
12:00 – 12:30	Small group discussion: self organized
12:30 – 12:40	Break
Session Four 12:40 – 14:00	Moderator: Marwan Awartani  Organizational issues, summary, follow up and next steps
Saturday 4 February	Departure