

Children's perspective on the impact of the school environment on their Well being

Qualitative Research Component

Draft for Amman meeting

Background

The vision of UEF is Education by All for the Well Being of Children. Within this context we believe that it is essential that children's voices should be heard and taken account in determining their learning environments so that these environments can be more responsive to their needs and better serve their well being and holistic development.

The Voice of Children Initiative will conduct periodic qualitative and quantitative surveys in different parts of the world, of children's feelings, opinions, perceptions and attitudes towards the school, media, and ICT learning environments. This is consistent with the foundation's belief that ICT and media have become critical learning environments contributing to shaping learner's mindsets and behavior patterns and thus have significant impact on their physical, mental, emotional social and spiritual well being. The surveys will seek to identify the impact of these environments on children's overall well being as they perceive it, and to better understand the learning needs and concerns of the primary clients of the learning system.

It is intended that the insights provided by the surveys will constitute a significant contribution to the current debate on reforming education systems and to the design of new interventions by governments, civil society or business organizations. The purpose of the Voice of Children Initiative is to engage children and young people more proactively in discussions related to their learning environments. Through the surveys, children will be able to participate in reshaping their learning environments so that they can become more conducive to their holistic personal development and well being and to become more responsive to their needs and to the needs of their communities. Bringing the voices of the new generation to the educational reform agenda is consistent with the global thrust towards widening and deepening citizens' participation and youth empowerment. In the context of the Voice of Children Initiative (VCI), other ways of systematically listening to the voice of children, such as an e-voices portal, will be explored.

The Voice of Children Initiative has been conceived by the Universal Education Foundation and its global partners. We have decided to pilot it in the MENA region in three countries (Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine) with the purpose of using the results to enhance the design and implementation. It is the intention of the Voice of Children Initiative partners to adapt and replicate the initiative to other regions of the world including Europe, Asia, etc.. Findings will be analyzed against a number of background variables including gender, age group, type of residence (urban, rural,...), ..etc. Findings will be presented at the Universal Education Forum and will be disseminated to various stakeholders in education, health, media and ICT systems.

Well Being

The issue of well being is a highly complex one which touches on almost every aspect of a child's life. Given that the integrative and holistic approach to understanding the well being of children from their own perspective covers new ground, we will need to learn by experience, and build and refine our studies in a gradual and systematic way.

UEF defines well being as the realization of the physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual potential. While UEF is working towards a deeper understanding of well being, as the surveys progress we hope to deepen and refine our definition and indicators. Researchers will be exposed to the UEF's current understanding of well being in order to be aware of parameters that may be important to ask children about. However, researchers will be trained to try to elicit material from children in the most open ended way possible in ways that do not impose UEF paradigms.

The VCI surveys will begin with a number of qualitative pilot surveys. The pilot qualitative surveys will:

1. Apply, test out and refine current UEF concepts and methodological approach in preparation for the ongoing surveys.
2. Provide maximum opportunity for us to learn what is on the hearts and minds of children in relation to the three learning environments.
3. Refine our concept of well being through soliciting the views of children about well being,
4. Refine our methodologies for accessing information about the impact of the learning environments on children' well being.
5. Prioritize areas of well being that are most relevant to focus on in quantitative surveys taking into consideration different factors such as cultures, gender, age groups and perhaps with different sectors of society.

6. Provide insights about the indicators of well being that will be integrated into the quantitative surveys.

Piloting the methodology with children in the school setting:

The first Pilot study will focus on the children perspective of the impact of the school environment on their well being and on their concept of well being. The pilot will focus on the following **key aspects** while conducting the in depth interviews (individual and focus groups):

1. The overall sense of what is foreground in children hearts and minds in relation to the components/dimensions of the school environment.
2. The overall sense of what is foreground in the hearts and minds of participants in relation to the idea of well being. While working within a broad definition of well being, we will strive not to impose adult preconceptions or concepts on the research, and to be as open as possible to learning about the child's experience and understanding of well being through their own prisms.
3. Their sense of the impact of the different aspects of the school environment on their own and others well being.
4. Their sense of what could be done differently within learning environments to better serve/promote their well being.
5. Their sense of the effectiveness of the methodology.

Proposed Methodology

Guidelines:

Target Population: The target population will be an equal number of boys and girls of 15 and 16 years old in Ramallah who represent different types of schools (private & public sectors or general education and vocational schools or children in the higher grade percentile in class and in lower percentiles).

Methods of in depth interviews:

1. Focus groups vs. individual interviews: It is not yet clear which will be most effective in working with ages 15 to 16 year olds. We are concerned that focus groups may inhibit some of the participants especially dealing with sensitive issues. For example; adolescents are particularly concerned with peer opinion and we will be exploring information that can be sensitive regarding different types of feelings and

experiences. It is also not clear what the impact of same gender groups or mixed gender groups will be on their responses.

2. In order to work with these questions, we will conduct two separate approaches for the first pilot :
 - a. One mixed gender group of 4 girls and 4 boys. When the group interview is over the eight participants will be then interviewed individually. They will be asked if there is anything they would like to add that they had not brought up in the group situation that would be useful for us to know. They will also be asked about their views on the methodology including the impact of the group situation on the outcome of the research and whether they think it would be more effective to do such research in a group or in individual interviews or otherwise.
 - b. 8 separate individual interviews, four with boys and four with girls. These participants will also be asked at the end of the interview about their reflections on the methodology as well as about the individual vs. group issue.

The following is the suggested research process that will be adapted for the focus groups and for the individual interviews and some examples of questions. There are 5 different stages:

The First Part of the Interview

1. Initially the participants will be asked in as open way as possible to sketch out a picture of school, together, on a large piece of paper with a request such as: “Think about your school environment, what are the different parts of it and try and draw a picture of it.” The group of children will be given time to think what in the school environment should be included in the map indicating the place, people and activities in each component. They will be told that it does not have to be a realistic picture or a good drawing, just a schema of the different parts of the school environment and how they relate to each other”. It would be important to video this process as a lot of the process material in the decision making and the different ideas of different group members will be lost in the final sketch.
2. After the mapping exercise, the facilitator will put the map on the wall/or a stand in a way that can be shown clearly to all members of the group. The different elements of the school environment can include for instance: Teachers, class room, principal,

school grounds, cafeteria, breaks, classes, homework, computer room, music room, sports grounds, exams, etc. Our aim is to see what the children initially includes and excludes without being given such a list.

Then the facilitator will ask the children to express their feelings about the different aspects of the school environment.

- ❖ One way to do this is for them to be given a set of sticky labels with visual symbols such as emoticons that express different feelings, attitudes or values. The facilitator can direct attention to the different aspects of the learning environment and ask each participant to choose one of them that most reflects his feeling about that aspect of the learning environment and to stick his label onto that place in the drawing. This will be done for each of the aspects. The result will be that each aspect of the learning environment will have 8 different stickers from each participant. The facilitator will then ask the participants to elaborate on why they chose the specific sticker.

The advantage of the stickers are that they provide each participant with an opportunity for reflection and expression prior to being influenced by the other participants views.

Another advantage of the visual stickers are that they provide an intuitive bridge to verbal articulation. It is often more difficult for a child to answer directly the question – what do you feel about the lesson than to answer, which picture do you most associate with the class and why? The stickers serve as a bridge to a deeper discussion about the thoughts and feelings regarding each part of the school environment and to the question of “What are your feelings and thoughts about the lesson/cafeteria/break time/schedule etc? What would you like to see done differently?”

The following is an example of emoticons taken from the internet. If we choose this methodology we will need to create a list that most express the values we wish to ask about and age appropriate emoticons



- ❖ If we choose not to use the emoticons, we can immediately ask the group as a whole the question: What are your feelings and thoughts about the lesson/cafeteria/break time/schedule etc? What would you like to see done differently in these different aspects of the school environment?

Researchers will have a list of the different elements of the school environment. Some of these will be included in the children's map and some of these the children may not spontaneously be included on their initiative.

After the children have discussed their feelings about the map that they have created, the interviewer can list the elements that were not included in their original drawing and ask for their feelings and thoughts about these.

The second part of the interview

In the second part of the interview participants will be asked to close their eyes and to allow one incident that happened at school to come up in their minds and then to share that incident with the interviewer. This exercise will draw out narratives of incidents that are prominent in their minds for all sorts of reasons. By analyzing the narratives of the participants in terms of common themes and patterns we hope to be able to get a sense of some of the areas of preoccupation for the children that are worth paying attention to.

Once they have shared the story, the interviewer will ask them more specifically for incidents that reflect a full range of experiences in order to learn about what aspects of the school environment they associate with different feelings and why.

This section is thus based on stories that the children tell in response to open ended questions such as:

- ❖ What do you remember as some of the most pleasurable/rewarding incidents for you at school?
- ❖ What incidents were the most inspiring to you? In what way?
- ❖ Were there any incidents where you felt frustrated, if so what? How?
- ❖ Were there any incidents that made you scared, if so what? How?
- ❖ What do remember as some of the most meaningful/rewarding experiences at school? How?
- ❖ What are some of the incidents that made you angry?

- ❖ What are some of the studies/classes you find most interesting or that you most look forward to? Why?
- ❖ What are the things you most enjoy about the other kids at school?
- ❖ What are the things you least enjoy about the other kids at school?
- ❖ What teachers have been your favorite teachers and why?
- ❖ What teachers have you least liked and why?
- ❖ How does your body feel at different times of the day at school? What do you think the reasons are for this?
- ❖ Which adults at school do you most admire? Why?
- ❖ Which kids at school do you most admire? Why?
- ❖ What would you like to be when you are an adult? Why?
- ❖ In what way do you think school prepares you for your adult life? In what ways do you think it should prepare you more/differently than it does

As you can see the questions have been phrased in different ways. We need to think of the most appropriate phrasing for each question. We may also need to prioritize and choose only a few out of all of these questions.

The third part of the interview will be to explore children's own perceptions of well being. The first questions can open ended one. For instance:

- ❖ What does it mean for children to feel really good about themselves and about their environment?
- ❖ What would you say are the different aspects of feeling good about oneself?
- ❖ What would you say are the different aspects of feeling good about ones environment?
- ❖ What does it mean to feel really healthy and fulfilled?
- ❖ What does it mean for a child to develop in the best possible way?
- ❖ (These are initial suggestions. We need to find the right child friendly way of asking about their understanding of well being).

The first question is an attempt to find out what is prominent in the child's heart and mind when he thinks of being healthy in every way, or functioning as best as he would want to in every single way. As yet we do not suggest the different aspects of well being.

After the participant has answered, the interviewer will say:

Well being can be seen as the realization of ones physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual potential.

What do you think each of these would mean? I

i.e. What do you think it means for a child to fulfil his/her physical potential? Emotional potential, social potential, mental potential, spiritual potential?

When the child has answered this, the interviewer will ask

- ❖ What do you think the impact of the different aspects of the school environment is on children's physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual well being in general?
- ❖ What do you think the impact of the school environment is on your own physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual well being? (This question also seeks to offer an opportunity to sense if kids see the impact differently for themselves and for others.)
- ❖ What do you think school can do better to support children in fulfilling their physical, emotional, social, mental and spiritual potential?

The third part of the interview related to children perception on the methodology (30 minutes):

After the interview about the impact of the school environment on the well being of children, the children will be asked questions on the methodology of the interview itself.

The children will be explained the purpose of the whole interview process within the context of UEF and asked to help us think how we can access the information that will be most effective in understanding the impact of the learning environments on children and what they think should be done differently in the educational system.

- ❖ What do think of this process? What did you like most about this meeting? What allowed you to express your views adequately and freely?
- ❖ What things did you not like? What prevented you from expressing your views freely?
- ❖ What suggestions do you have that would allow children to express their views more freely?
- ❖ What are other things to add or change to make this exercise more enjoyable and effective?

Audio and video taping:

This can be done after getting the approval of children and their families. It is recommended that we at least audio tape and video tape one session at least in order to observe the whole process for improving the methodology. We need to minimize the impact of this on the ability of children to express their views freely.

Further guidelines for the training will be prepared later to prepare the interviewers field guidelines in a more detailed and specific way.

Suggestions regarding the researchers

The survey described here is a qualitative one which touches on the inner world of the participants. One would need highly skilled interviewers who are familiar with being able to elicit information from children in empathic ways, to be able to listen actively, reflect back material and ask open ended questions, give a sense of the relevance and importance of what the participant is saying while minimally influencing the content. We suggest psychology or social work students, one male and one female with extensive experience in this type of active listening.

We suggest that the researchers will go through a training process where they will have an opportunity to practice the full interview process and receive feedback and to develop the field guidelines. They will also need to be trained in the concept of well being in order to be able to ask relevant questions that tap into the five dimensions. Further guidelines will be incorporated to ensure high quality in-depth interviews with target children

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