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Hopes and Fears for the Future: Voices of Children from Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract

This study identifies children's hopes and fears for the future and the role of education in Kyrgyzstan. Like other children, they were concerned about the environment, crime, violence, poverty and health but also about the revival of their national identity. Many worried about political and economic instability, hoping the new political regime would bring prosperity. They appeared to be active consumers of media, but their understanding of local and global issues was often superficial and their actions were teacher-directed and sometimes tokenistic.

This study aimed to identify children's hopes and fears for personal, local and global futures and the role of education in Kyrgyzstan. The first part of the study involved 100 children, 50 girls and 50 boys of grade five from four different schools in Osh oblast of Kyrgyzstan. Except for one urban school, which had mixed nationalities, the children in three schools were of ethnic Kyrgyz origin. All the schools were co-educational as this was the case for all schools during the Soviet era. In the second part, focus group interviews were conducted with four to five children representing both sexes from each school. This data was used to support the findings further. The study was conducted after 14 years of the globally significant political event, the disintegration of the Soviet Union or USSR, of which the Kyrgyz Republic was part.

The Background

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Kyrgyz Republic became an independent country that quickly drew the attention of western democracies with its ambitious attempts to shift from a single party power structure to a pluralistic electoral system and moving from a centralised state economy to a market-oriented one (Abazov, 2004).

The USSR's break-up brought chaos and uncertainty to the lives of thousands due to economic crises. Almost half of Kyrgyzstan's population lives below the poverty line. Worsening socio-economic and unstable political conditions have caused many to migrate. Families who have migrated to Russia and Kazakhstan live and work in poor living conditions and do not usually have access to education. Increased internal migration of the unemployed has caused problems of worsening law and order, acute shortages of housing and paucity of employment opportunities in urban areas. The harsh socio-economic conditions are especially difficult for the young people of Kyrgyzstan, where the government has failed to provide better conditions after the USSR-disintegration. Rather they pose increasing risks of political instability and conflict (International Crisis Group, 2003). For many alienated young people, especially men,

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involvement in drug trafficking, prostitution and racketeering competes with education as a route to socio-economic betterment.

In addition to difficult socio-economic conditions (International Crisis Group, 2003), inadequate public funding for health services and rising prices for medicine has affected the health status of people (UNDP report, 2003). A steady and alarming increase of sexually transmitted diseases has been also recorded in Kyrgyzstan (Rashid, 2002; UNDP report, 2003).

Economic decline and political instability have caused the rise of Islamic extremism in Central Asia (Megoran, 2002). As Rashid (2002) noted, 'The fact that even some Kyrgyz, one of the least Islamicised ethnic groups in Central Asia, are now turning to radical Islam as an answer to their pitiful living conditions demonstrates the desperation of their economic situation' (p.72). Religious extremist groups have been especially successful in recruiting disillusioned youth (International Crisis Group, 2003).

Disillusionment of the people with the first president Akaev of Kyrgyzstan led to popular uprising on March 2005. The new president Bakiev came to power in 2005. Since 2005, the people of Kyrgyzstan still continue to protest against and in favour of the present government. Thus, current socio-economic and political instability in Kyrgyzstan has affected the way the children in our survey viewed their personal future, the future of Kyrgyzstan and of the world.

The findings

Kyrgyzstani children's views about the future reflected what was happening in their contemporary society. Children's perspectives for their personal futures highlighted that gender was a 'key factor in determining how children think and feel about the future' (Hicks & Holden, 1995).

Personal futures

| Themes | Girls | Boys |
|----------------------|--------------|-------------|
| Job aspirations | 100% | 100% |
| Ambitions | 52% | 46% |
| Relationships | 42% | 32% |
| Material possessions | 35% | 18% |
| Education | 22% | 12% |
| Health | 2% | 4% |

Table 1 Hopes for the personal future (percentage of children mentioning these hopes)

As it is shown in Table 1, children were highly concerned about finding employment. This reflects the rapid growth of unemployment in post-Soviet societies. Commonly cited professions were teaching, medicine, politics and interpreting. Gender stereotypical images were clearly identified in their aspirations for professions. More girls wished to

become professionals such as doctors, teachers and interpreters while a few aspired to creative professions including singing, acting and journalism. With the exception of one urban girls who wished to ‘become a State Secretary like Condoleezza Rice’, most girls did not mention any professions related to governance and management. In contrast, a greater number of boys aspired to become president, MP or a minister. Girls aspired to get better school and university education so as to find jobs in the future. Some children insisted that education alone does not necessarily guarantee better paid jobs. This view reflected the current state of rising unemployment among university graduates.

Kyrgyzstani children had clear ambitions for their future. Girls’ ambitions were geared towards personal freedom and independence, as opposed to boys who exaggerated their ability to eradicate poverty in the country. Rural boys’ ambitions were linked with their Kyrgyz identity. They desired to reconstruct their national identity, to revive folk songs and enrich the Kyrgyz language. Boys, especially urban, were also highly imaginative about their future and feared a fantasy future: ‘I hope to travel to different planets for my vacation in future and wish that all planets have life’, or ‘extraterrestrials may attack our planet’. However, most children’s hopes and fears were closely rooted to the adult and contemporary world (Hicks and Holden, 1995).

Healthy personal relationships with families, relatives, friends, and future spouses were also mentioned. Boys expressed their fear of not being able to live up to the expectations of their parents (See Table 2). Girls referred to their hopes to help people, care for their parents, and have friends.

| Themes | Girls | Boys |
|----------------------|-------|------|
| Success and failure | 84% | 72% |
| Health | 68% | 100% |
| Relationships | 26% | 28% |
| Being a victim | 42% | 6% |
| Material possessions | 35% | 18% |
| Poverty | 12% | 4% |
| War | 8% | 12% |

Table 2 Fears for the personal future (percentage of children mentioning these fears)

Boys hoped to become rich and gain material possessions, especially property. However, the kind of material possessions desired varied according to geographic contexts. A rural boy expressed his ambition to have cattle, a traditional measure of wealth in Kyrgyz culture. In contrast, urban boys wished to own cars and multistoried houses. Children considered personal health as important. More boys feared health related problems as compared to girls. Spread of HIV-AIDS, avian flu, alcohol abuse, drug addiction and injuries were seen as potential concerns for personal health.

On the one hand, some children’s future fears were immediate and related to their everyday experiences as boys feared losing a volleyball match to the ‘rival’ class. On the

other hand, some of their fears are expected in distant future. More girls expressed their fear of becoming victims of an attack, sexual assault, kidnapping, physical abuse and robbery. Their fear about 'bride abduction' is prevalent in contemporary Kyrgyz culture. Children were also concerned about future military conflicts, inter-ethnic tensions, or wars that could affect their personal future.

Local futures

Children were concerned both with environment degradation and the consequences of natural disasters in local areas.

| Themes | Girls | Boys |
|-------------------------|-------|------|
| Community issues | 72% | 66% |
| Poverty and development | 66% | 70% |
| Environment | 50% | 20% |
| Local facilities | 50% | 56% |
| War | 36% | 24% |
| National issues | 12% | 8% |
| Health | 4% | 8% |
| Technology | 4% | 4% |
| Violence and crime | 2% | 6% |

Table 3 Hopes for local future (percentage of children mentioning these hopes)

| Themes | Girls | Boys |
|-------------------------|-------|------|
| Disasters | 100% | 100% |
| War/Instability | 54% | 60% |
| Health | 46% | 68% |
| Violence and crime | 42% | 28% |
| Poverty and development | 10% | 8% |
| Environment | 10% | 2% |
| Community issues | 6% | 2% |
| National issues | 2% | 0% |

Table 4 Fears for local future (percentage of children mentioning these fears)

Children were highly concerned (see Table 4) about natural disasters like earthquakes, floods and landslides in the local area's future. These national disasters are common due to the geographic location of the country. The study was conducted soon after the tragic earthquake in Pakistan in October 2005 and that affected their perceptions of natural

disasters. Moreover, children connected current environmental issues in Kyrgyzstan to global climate change. They expressed their concerns over melting glaciers in Kyrgyzstan's mountains. Some children were optimistic that there might be fewer natural disasters in future when people would be more educated and would have learned how to prevent or handle natural disasters. Children wanted to see increased and improved facilities such as the construction of clean and green beautiful parks and gardens, wide roads and high buildings in their local areas.

Health issues in their communities also worried children. According to some children, the health status of community members was deteriorating year by year and people might be affected by such diseases as anthrax, avian flu and AIDS. The children connected health issues with excessive alcohol consumption, smoking, drug addiction and the effect of increased environmental pollution. Some children foresaw the spread of diseases brought by foreigners or Kyrgyzstani citizens returning from abroad. A child worried that 'People coming from different countries are bringing diseases'. A boy considered that religion could be a solution for increased alcohol consumption. 'I want to pray. Many people are drinking vodka and becoming drunkards. I will encourage drunkards pray to be disciplined'.

Children also hoped for safety and security in their local communities. They hoped for peace and ethnic harmony in the community and feared violence and terrorism. However, children who were not ethnically Kyrgyz predicted an increase in ethnic prejudice and intolerance in Kyrgyzstan. These children expressed concerns that they were bullied, insulted and teased because they were not Kyrgyz. In contrast ethnic Kyrgyz children believed that Kyrgyzstan was a tolerant country. However, they also thought that Kyrgyz citizens in Russia or Kazakhstan were subject to discrimination and violence. Some provided examples of how their relatives were attacked by 'skinheads' in Russian cities. A few rural children asserted that Kyrgyz language and identity would suffer in future, due to the dominating role of more powerful languages in the region. They called for the strengthening of their language and identity in future.

Politics in Kyrgyzstan was a concern as well. Children's fears for Kyrgyzstan also related to the uprising of thousands against Akaev's regime in Kyrgyzstan in March 2005 that led Akaev to step down from power. The event has also resulted in electing Bakiev, one of the organisers of the March protest, as a president of the country. This event affected children directly when their schools were closed and some relatives participated in protests. The media appeared to have an indirect effect on their perceptions. Children predicted future political instability as they thought some politicians and members of parliament would 'fight' with one another. They were scared that disagreements could provoke severe conflicts between different regions in Kyrgyzstan.

Children expressed their optimism for Kyrgyzstan's future. They had confidence that Kyrgyzstan would experience economic prosperity and development. According to children if the country experienced economic growth it would lead to an improved infrastructure and increase in employment. Children mentioned several aspects of economic growth. They recognized the need for regional economic cooperation and suggested regional trade cooperation with countries like Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Russia

and China. Moreover, Kyrgyzstani children felt that Kyrgyzstan could prosper if it integrated with Europe. Europe seemed to provide a model of development and growth that Kyrgyzstan should strive to achieve. Along with these hopes, the children also had fears that Kyrgyzstan's sovereignty and independence could be at stake if the country was not able to pay off its external debts in future.

Children linked poor economic development and deteriorating living standards to the regime of the former president, Akaev. A rural boy remarked, 'Akaev was selling the land and gold of Kyrgyzstan'. Many children have high hopes for Bakiev, the new president. A girl shared her views: 'Bakiev has increased the salaries. The life is improving'. However, they predicted that a failure to improve the economy would result in removing Bakiev from presidency, 'People suffered a lot during Akaev's regime. Bakiev saw how people defeated Akaev, and he knows what people did during protests. People were determined and they just took the power from the hands of Akaev'.

Children were concerned about corruption and nepotism in Kyrgyzstan, especially in the current health, judiciary and law enforcement systems. They considered that corrupt schools and universities provided poor quality education and prepared mediocre graduates. However, a few said optimistically that they could prevent corruption if they became judges or policemen in future. They believed in creating a just and transparent Kyrgyzstani society in the future.

Future of the world

Children's perceptions about the global future reflected their hopes and fears for personal and local futures.

Among their hopes 'peace' ranked the highest. Children hoped for a future world 'without terrorism and violence' and unity among the nations. Some predicted more wars or conflicts over natural resources in future. Some provided examples of such conflicts that included the USA's presence in Iraq and the Russia-Ukraine gas-conflict in 2005. A boy stated, 'USA said that they would find nuclear weapons in Iraq, but they actually entered Iraq because of its large oil reserves'. Some boys emphasised their fears for the global future predicting 'galactic wars'. Girls were more concerned about relationships among people.

Children demonstrated an understanding of global issues beyond their local communities and country. Their answers quite often related to economic prosperity, sufficient food for everyone and the decrease of poverty in the world. Some children shared their expectations that richer countries should help poorer countries, while another group expressed their fears of being dominated by powerful countries. Many children also hoped that future technological progress would improve people's lives.

| Themes | Girls | Boys |
|-------------------------|-------|------|
| Relationships | 100% | 66% |
| No war | 90% | 100% |
| Poverty and development | 42% | 54% |
| Environment | 18% | 26% |
| Health | 14% | 10% |
| Culture | 12% | 8% |
| No crime and violence | | 2% |

Table 5 Hopes for global future (percentage of children mentioning these hopes)

| Themes | Girls | Boys |
|-------------------------|-------|------|
| Disasters | 78% | 88% |
| War | 48% | 34% |
| Violence and crime | 44% | 30% |
| Health | 30% | 58% |
| Relationships | 22% | 12% |
| Environment | 10% | 12% |
| Poverty and development | 8% | 4% |
| Traffic | 4% | 2% |
| Technology | 2% | |

Table 6 Fears for global future (percentage of children mentioning these fears)

Interestingly, children's responses on technological development differed. Boys asserted the positive impact of technological progress as they believed in inventions such as flying cars, travel to Mars, and development of chips to replace the human brain. In contrast to this, girls predicted the negative impact of technology and research. A girl shared her concern over cloning and feared that 'everyone would become the same if cloning is done, without any emotions, like robots'.

When asked whether they contributed to improving local communities, most children said they did. However, their activities were limited to school clean up days and helping old people during holidays (Veteran's Day, International Women's Day). They mentioned their behaviour such as not littering, picking up garbage, keeping their environment beautiful and planting trees alongside their ambitious future actions to help poor people to lead better lives. Although children's responses demonstrated their optimism for the future, their current contribution leaves some doubt.

Conclusion

Children's perspectives about their personal future are gendered. Schools seem to do little to challenge their taken-for-granted assumptions in relation to their gender. It is also apparent that all of the children have very real concerns for their personal, the local and the global futures. However, their confusion exhibited as they tried to make sense of complex issues at national and global levels (political instability in the Kyrgyz Republic; war on terror) requires the careful and critical examination of such issues in school curriculum. Similarly, despite findings which indicate that many Kyrgyzstani children are aware of the political situation in their country, their understandings are generated through media that usually brings its own bias and prejudice into the minds of young children.

Though children's keenness to contribute to the improvement of local and global society was high at this young age, these children lacked opportunities for active and committed engagement with activities so as to create a democratic society. Rather there is a danger that their current 'tokenistic' and fragmented activities in schools may not necessarily lead towards sustained action and a sense of accomplishment. Neither do such activities develop children's sense of responsibility, commitment to become actively involved in community life and ability to learn independently. Although, one can appreciate the difficulties faced by teachers in grappling with the competing demands of contemporary Kyrgyzstani society, as critical agents of change, they are the ones who have to be proactive in the education of active and responsible citizens of democratic Kyrgyzstan.

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