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How They See It: Young Children and Youth's Perspectives about the Future

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Abstract

This report tries to understand the ways in which minority language issues emerge in educational agendas –both in policy or practice- and to consider the impact diverse perspectives of language practices have on policy and practice outcomes. In this thematic report – which is part of the EPASI in Europe project - we first sketch out the theoretical framework used and in order to do this, we start with the idea that there is a dialogue between social theory and linguistic theory. In our approach to policy, discourse is understood as a conceptualisation of reality at a particular point in time – in other words, any discourse holds certain ideas that are legitimated by logic appropriate to the discourse in question.

Introduction

This article describes research into Spanish children and adolescents' hopes and fears for the future at personal, local and global levels. The research is part of a larger two- year investigation, which is currently being carried out internationally and supported by the European Research Foundation (ESF)¹. The Spanish research team, made up of two university units based at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) and the Universidad de Cordoba (UCO) has recently initiated the field work for the ESF project. Part of the analysis offered in this paper will be based on a sampling of the qualitative data compiled by the UAB team thus far and part of the paper will be based on previous research carried out by the UCO before embarking on the ESF project.

This previous study serves as a comparative framework for methodology and analysis and thus it is germane to discuss it along with the discussion of the first phase of the ESF project. Of course, we are aware of the problems associated with comparing results from two projects of different sample sizes and different aims. Discrepancies in category profiles and variability are inevitable; however we suggest that comparison can provide a starting point for discussing the fundamental issues of validity and relevance in sociologically oriented research, as seen from different theoretical frameworks. Furthermore, we consider this variety of frameworks to be a rich resource that helps highlight the complexity of such studies since it can contribute to deeper insight into the underlying assumptions and differences of theories or approaches in social research.

¹ Citizens of the future: the concerns and actions of young people around current European and global issues. Funding organisations: PAN (Poland); MEC (Spain); TÜBİTAK (Turkey).

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Theoretical Framework

When discussing projected hopes and fears of children and adolescents, there may be several different ways to categorise the objects enumerated by the respondents in relation to the concepts of hope and fear. Boehnke *et al* (1998) make a distinction between “micro” concerns which place self (or intimates who are seen as extensions of self, such as family) at the centre while “macro” places external entities at the centre of their concerns (e.g. society, the world or the universe). While this differentiation of categories is useful as a preliminary approach to the respondents’ answers, it cannot be applied fully to the analysis of the ESF data because the questionnaires used in this research “obliged” the respondents to focus on both micro and macro levels (see sample of part of the questionnaire in appendix). However, placing the objects in relation to the concepts being studied provides a starting point for categorising the qualitative data stemming from open-ended questions such as “what are your three main hopes for your own personal future?”

Boehnke *et al.*, (1998) and Schwartz, *et al.* (2000) also propose that there are different instruments for measuring fears and that these coincide in seven domains: health, safety, environment, social relations, meaning of life, achievement at work and in studies, and economy. Bearing in mind that the approach taken to the ESF data was based on grounded theory (Glassner and Strauss, 1967), the categories were not established prior to analysis (profiling) since using grounded theory implies an inductive approach that allows the analysis to ‘emerge’ from the data. Nonetheless, the categories mentioned above did prove to coincide quite closely with the predominant themes that emerged and which were related to the fears and hopes of the respondents in the preliminary ESF sampling, thus providing universal parameters or ‘key-words’ to use in the category descriptors.

Brief description of both studies

The UCO study aimed to analyse the variations that age triggers on the contents and prevalence of the categories of wishes and fears in adolescent populations in relation to certain socio-demographic variables (gender, age and cultural origin). While the study was carried out in several countries, for brevity, only the data from Spain will be considered herein. As is proposed in the ESF project, the UCO study followed a mixed (qualitative and quantitative) methodology.

The sample included 938 students from Compulsory Secondary Education (Educación Secundaria Obligatoria) with ages ranging from 12 to 18 (mean = 14.19 years, *s.d.* = 1.46); 46.7% were female and 53.3% male. 64.4% were born in Spain while 19.7% came from countries in South America and 12.8% from African countries. The immigrant students had been living in Spain for an average of 10.31 years (*s.d.* = 5.28).

Respondents were asked two open-ended questions, adapted from the School Health Behaviour Inventory (Wold, 1995). The questions were:

- “When you think about your life and the future in general, which are the three things you most wish for in the future?”
- “Which are the three things you most fear in the future?”

The participants' answers were analysed using a system of categories based on the content analysis methodology (Bardin, 1996; Behar, 1993; Tesch, 1990) which in turn stems from suppositions of the Grounded Theory (Glassner and Strauss, 1967; Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003). This iterative method allows for detecting regularities that can be developed into a system of categories (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003). According to the frequency of appearance of each category, variables related to wishes and fears were identified and could then be used as a unit for scoring the answers. Hence, the score ranges between 0 and 3, 0 being the non-appearance of this category in any of the three options of answer, and 3 its appearance in all three options.

The UAB study is based on data collected thus far in the ESF project. Questionnaires have been collected from two different schools in the metropolitan area of Barcelona. In the case of the youngest group, the school is a public school with direct links to the Faculty of Education of the UAB. It has a strong academic tradition and is considered one of the more innovative public schools in the area. The socio-economic background of the students tends to be middle to upper class families. The other two groups in the study belonged to a combined middle and secondary education public school in a largely industrial area. The socio-economic background of students is mainly working class; approximately 12,5% of the population are immigrants (Serra, 2006). The school is actively involved in international projects, twinning and cultural trips to other European countries and has won several prizes (drama, new technologies, etc.).

The ESF project aims to identify the hopes and concerns of young Europeans on personal, local and global levels and pertaining to the domains of political, socio-economical and environmental processes. It also looks at their willingness to engage in action within these domains (act as agents of change) and to what extent they are pessimistic or optimistic about the future. Like the UCO project, this study follows a mixed (qualitative and quantitative) methodology but the data analysis carried out so far is mainly inductive, grounded in the examination and inference of topics and themes from raw data.

The UAB sample described herein includes 118 questionnaires dealing with the subjects' perspectives about the future at three different levels – the personal arena, around their neighbourhood, and the world level. The questionnaires were given to three age groups of students aged 10-11 (39% of the sample); students aged 13-14 (34 %); and students aged 16-17 (27%). After administering the questionnaires, all the students participated in a 'social game', followed by brief semi-guided interviews about their responses in the game. Finally, based on the respondents' answers in the questionnaires, small focus groups were chosen for more detailed data recording sessions. The interviews and focus-group interviews are being transcribed using the ELAN² programme.

For this preliminary study, the UAB team only had time to partially analyse the questionnaires and transcribe a section of the interviews. Because of lack of reliability due to the small number of processed questionnaires in two of the groups, the UAB team

² The ELAN programme allows for annotations to audio and/or video streams on multiple tiers and the transcription is stored in an XML format.

has randomly selected samples from each age group and focused on the open-ended questionnaires. Using inductive, grounded theory as the basis for the analysis of the sample data to 'conceptualise' the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1967), the UAB team first identified relevant categories that 'emerge' from the data (open coding stage) which was triangulated by various members of the UAB team. This allowed the researchers to pinpoint recurring categories ('density' of categories) without losing contact with the actual comments made by the respondents.

Comparison of results

The UCO study found that when responding to the question of the three things they most wished for in the future, work was most frequently referred to (47.5%), followed by wishes for the family, economic welfare and personal fulfilment. To have satisfactory personal relations, enjoy good health and continue their studies were also mentioned. Finally, wishes relating to altruism or interests of a social nature, keeping in touch with one's roots, being lucky and other types of wishes were the least mentioned units.

Similarly, in the question related to personal hopes for the future in the UAB study, family was a relevant category that emerged (e.g. that my family is happy all their lives; to have a big family; to have children) however, it was the most recurrent category for the 10-11 age group only. This category was followed by material goods in all the age groups and with similar "sub-themes" of having a big house and owning a car. Another significant theme for all the age groups was related to personal achievement. In this case, personal achievement was more frequent for the 17-18 age group however it was mentioned even by the 10-11 group. Still, for this group this category was not predominantly tied to future jobs as it was for the older group.

The UAB study also posed the question of hopes for the future at the local and global level. As far as wishes for the local community, the two most recurrent categories were related to physical improvements in the neighbourhood (predominant for the younger group) and safety (more frequent in the older age groups). The 10-11 year old students did not mention social relations (calling into play the domains mentioned by Boehnke et al., 1998; Schwartz, Sagiv, & Boehnke, 2000) whereas the other two groups did. These included desires for better integration of immigrants and the more abstract hope for "people in the neighbourhood to open their minds for greater comprehension between everyone". On the global level, environmental concerns were predominant, followed closely by concerns for 3rd world problems (economic and social inequalities, poverty, high death rates) and desires for world peace and end of violence in general.

In the area of fears, the UCO study found that the outstanding fear of the respondents concerned the possibility of losing their health or dying, or that this should happen to their family members. This fear was closely followed by other fears relating to work, the family and personal relations. Similarly, in the UAB samples, on the personal level fears of ill health or dying were also a recurrent category, more specifically for the 10-11 year olds who mentioned fear of losing a family member or prolonged illnesses as well as one mention of fear of having handicapped children. This was less prevalent for the older groups who placed more emphasis on fears concerning economic insecurity.

On the 'macro' level (using the categorisation proposed by Boehnke *et al*), the fears for local and global levels environmental problems (pollution, hole in the ozone, climatic change, greenhouse effect), problems deriving from the socio-economic domain (world crisis brought about by petroleum; differences between world powers; division between rich & poor; poverty) and world violence (terrorism, wars, criminal violence). The data of the 13-14 year old group also showed concern of being personally aggressed and fear of deterioration of social order (that people don't follow the rules; that schools get worse, that people destroy public property). Relevant to these answers, it is significant to note important political and economic changes in the situation of Spain in the last 15 years. Currently unemployment is no longer a major issue (although it might be in the future), thus all the age groups included in this study have lived with continuous economic growth and political stability. However there are issues that are relevant in Spain now such as immigration, terrorism (both national and international), a growing "fear of the other" and these issues are now part of the political discourse and are highly emphasized by Spanish media.

Despite the economic growth of Spain following the transition to democracy, according to the data of the UCO study, inability to achieve a good economic position and not being able to fulfil their dreams were also common fears, followed by fears about socio-economic problems, the impossibility of finishing their studies and personal misfortune. The data from the UAB study showed similar fears among the older respondents (fear of being unable to afford housing; or unable to pay basic necessities to live) as well as concern about not finding a job or a job they would like and would feel gratified in. The youngest group, on the other hand, although mentioning fear of being poor or homeless, focused more on health aspects (to die a painful death or be involved in tragic accidents) or social relationships (family death or illnesses, friendless or be responsible for invalids such as handicapped children).

Other aspects of the studies

The UCO study highlights the correspondence between the categories of wishes to the category of fears. "The students' fears and wishes tend to revolve around the same things, e.g. if they wish to complete their studies satisfactorily they also fear not achieving this wish". The UAB study did not indicate such close correlations, albeit there are some similarities between the categories. For instance, in the age group 17-18, the respondents focus on personal achievement for desires (get a good job; be successful) are mirrored by some of the fears which emerge for this group (to be unemployed; to not be successful in their job) but at the same time, the fears seem to be more attuned to economic fears than personal achievement. Likewise, the 13-14 group focused their hopes (on the "micro" level) on personal achievement while their fears appeared to be more directly related to fears of economic difficulties.

The UAB study gathered data on the respondents' perspective on ways in which they felt that were/could be social actors aimed at changing their neighbourhood or the world for better and whether they were involved in organisations for change, on an individual or school level. A correspondence between their hopes and concerns and what they stated to have learnt about certain issues at school emerged from the data. For instance, the 10-11 year old group's fears for the future at a global level tended to be more specifically

detailed in areas that they had discussed or studied at school. Thus, environmental concerns were labelled: that the ice caps melt; that world pollution worsens; that the drought³ continues; that there is more climatic change, etc. Equally, problems related to socio-economic inequalities were specifically named: lack of food for 3rd world nations, drought in Africa, world poverty. Other fears – which did not correlate with stated school subjects – were more ambiguously named, such as natural disasters that the world is destroyed or that humans disappear (without stating the cause).

The UAB study also delved into the respondents' perspectives on what political leaders have done to improve the world; what they have done or would like to do and how they can influence political decisions. Concerning actions they have or would like to take, the younger respondents focused on charity (donate food; clothes; money) and improving the environment (recycling; not littering; saving water; stop uncontrolled construction and urbanisation). The 13-14 year old group also focused principally on environmental issues that they can help with (recycling; not littering; saving water; use electric cars; study to resolve the problem of global warming). The older group had more diversified responses. While they affirmed that they have tried to cut down on pollution by not littering, they also commented on their roles as adults in the immediate future when they will be able to study and find ways to contribute to a better world in the future; will be able to show others the need for dialogue and respect and become members of neighbourhood associations. An aspect of collaboration seemed to underlie several of the answers and one respondent stated "Whatever improvement there has been, it is not due to one person's efforts – it is through collaboration."

The respondents' showed considerable awareness of current political events, especially in the area of environmental issues (Al Gore was mentioned by respondents) and in efforts for World Peace (the Spanish president, Zapatero, was mentioned several times by respondents in different age groups for having removed Spanish troops from Iraq; and dealing with Basque terrorists – see earlier mention of the Spanish situation following the transition to democracy). The older group also mentioned historical events as examples of what leaders have done (women's right to vote; Spanish democracy) as well as recent measures to provide financial aide to youth and people taking care of dependent family members. For the 13-14 year old respondents, several of categories centred on the question of immigration -financial aide to immigrants; control and regulation of immigration; obliging immigrants to respect the host country. One respondent in this age group demonstrated very little faith in political leaders: "I don't like politics or politicians – they are going to cause us a lot of problems in future." Interestingly, the 10-11 year group showed themselves to be a specific and as politically "savvy" as the other groups.

Discussion

While the results are not conclusive, it does appear that there are similar concerns on the 'micro' level that can be observed in both studies. The respondents are both hopeful and

³ The fact that Catalonia Spain is suffering from water shortage due to a prolonged drought has been widely publicised in news and projects for saving water are transversal contents in most school curriculums.

worried about finding employment in the future and being able to afford the basic necessities of life. They are hopeful that there will be more – that they will be able to afford some luxuries such as a big house, to travel around the world, to have a car and many of their worries centre around illness and death in their families. More altruistic concerns were significantly higher in the UAB study, probably due to the fact that there were specific questions related to ‘macro’ levels. In these cases, their hopes and fears appear to be centred around desires for resolution of current environmental problems, current global crisis related to wars and terrorisms and socio-economic inequality between countries (between classes was not given any relevance by the respondents).

In both studies, the older the students, the more concerned they were about their professional future, which is characteristic of youth about to finish their secondary education (Anderson & Bryjack, 1989; Frydenberg and Lewis, 1996). However, these desires are nuanced by the desire for personal satisfaction and fulfillment in their future professions (not just being employed) – a desire which is also mentioned by the group of 11 to 12 year old students. Whereas students in the UCO study did demonstrate concern about global social issues, these did not take precedence over the more general concerns regarding work or family relationships. There were similar results in the ‘personal desires’ sections for the UAB group but this is inconclusive since the UAB questionnaires specifically asked about hopes and fears in three different realms, thus providing space for the respondents’ to discuss local and world issues.

The responses in the domains of ‘macro’ (local concerns, world concerns) provide a space for research into youth political awareness and agency. Most research into young children and youth’s views about social issues and political awareness have tended to cast them more as bystanders or targets of action by others, rather than as potential agents of social change (Ginwright & James, 2002; Yates & Youniss, 1998). It is possible to take Watts et al. (2003) theory of sociopolitical development (SPD) to describe how youth agency and a critical social analysis are directly related to their political action. In their early work, Watts et al. (1999) have shown how the relationship between an educational curriculum that works on increasing critical thinking can serve as the basis for critical consciousness and as a strategy to promote sociopolitical development. The framework also includes individual youth experiences. The fact that recent political developments (e.g. recent decisions made by the Spanish government; Basque terrorism), environmental issues (e.g. threat of drought in parts of Spain; global warming) coincides with students’ indications in their questionnaires that they had studied and/or discussed social and political issues in their schools. As mentioned earlier, political awareness was evident in all the age groups, not just in the older group. The emphasis on the need for collaboration in order to achieve social change was also an intriguing aspect that has emerged in this preliminary study.

The preliminary study indicates that youth want security, and in cases of social crisis (e.g. Basque terrorism, war) they desire resolution to the crisis. All the age groups are concerned about world peace but are not overly optimistic that political leaders will take the lead in solving it. At the same time, at least among the youngest group, the answers of how they might influence political leaders or whether they would become involved in politics in the future did reflect a more general belief in the current political system (write letters to political leaders, talk to them, demonstrate, etc.). Nonetheless, with the

older students (both groups) there is an increasing negativity about the possibility of influencing political leaders or being able to make a difference in the future. The responses indicate that the older the students become, the more sceptical and disheartened about the political system. Arguably, this does not coincide with their evident awareness of political and social issues, suggesting a mismatch between mainstream politics and politicians and today's youth rather than a lack of interest on behalf of the younger Spanish population.

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