

Childhood Explorer

Fall 2015



Exploring the Lives of Children Worldwide
Association for Childhood Education International

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Mindfulness for Peaceful Societies

Before school begins, Thea is sitting quietly with her eyes closed. She is noting her breaths, aware of the rise and fall of her chest, the sensation of her body resting on the wooden bench and her feet resting on the tile floor, the feel of her hands on her lap, and the temperature of the room. There is a seam on her shirt that is scratching her. She acknowledges it, but moves on; it does not derail her process. Her feet are warm in her boots. She listens to the noises around her—classmates greeting one another and settling into their places, birds chirping outside, the faint sound of a bus traveling down the street. She smells pencil shavings, wooden furniture, and chalk. Thea takes stock of her mental state. She acknowledges an uneasy feeling caused by frustration with herself for forgetting a school book. Thea imagines releasing that frustration and sending it far away. Refreshed, she returns to her breath—in, out, in, out, in, out. She opens her eyes.

In the example above, Thea is practicing mindfulness. Mindfulness is the in-the-moment awareness of one's thoughts, feelings, physical presence, and environment. It requires a conscious accounting of one's state of mind and one's relationship to others and to the world. The practice of mindfulness is simple to learn and can lead to a greater sense of peace and focus, reduced stress, and more harmonious relationships. It requires a person to identify what they are feeling, which can forestall violence or impulsive behavior and channel emotions in productive and thoughtful ways.

In practice, mindfulness is similar to meditation and can include awareness of one's breath, noticing thoughts as they pass through one's mind, identifying physical sensations associated with emotions, paying careful attention to ambient sounds, and "loving-kindness" meditation, which involves extending compassion and warm feelings to others.

Mindfulness is beneficial to the emotional and mental development of children as well as adults. It helps them respond thoughtfully to internal and external stimuli and builds self-awareness and confidence. Through the practice of mindfulness, children learn self-care, focus, compassion and empathy, and emotional regulation. Instead of reacting rashly when another student fails to complete work for a group assignment, a mindful child will consider his own emotions, demonstrate compassion for the other student (perhaps having been in that situation before), and respond thoughtfully and peacefully to the situation. This extension of compassion is a key practice of mindfulness. The cultivation of awareness is equally beneficial. Studies have shown the effectiveness of mindfulness in treating attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and behavioral problems, as well as improving academic performance and interpersonal relationships.

A growing global movement advocates for the cultivation of mindfulness in educators, children, and parents. Mindfulness, or contemplative practice, can reduce stress for educators and allow them room to breathe and be present in the classroom. It can help children relate better to one another, and help parents engage more thoughtfully with their children and with each other. Mindfulness is not bound to any specific religion, culture, or belief system. Its benefits are achievable by all, and can contribute to making the world a more peaceful and harmonious place.


Resources

<http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/mindfulness/definition>

<http://www.mindfulschools.org/about-mindfulness/research>

<http://www.mindfuleducation.org/what-is-mindfulness>





Tapori: Overcoming Poverty by Building Friendship Among All Children

By Diana Skelton and Marjorie Orcullo
ATD Fourth World: All Together in Dignity

Around the world, children who grow up in poverty and children who grow up in middle-class homes rarely have opportunities to get to know one another. Tapori is a friendship network that seeks to make connections between disparate groups of children possible. Its newsletter shares true stories from the point of view of children living in challenging circumstances, such as on the street or in an emergency housing shelter.

Children from more privileged backgrounds respond, often by sharing the ways that they try to make a positive difference. For example, in Switzerland, Britt and Yvan supported Valeria when other children bullied her for having thick, ugly glasses, which is the only kind her family could afford. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rene stuck up for Ono when others mocked him, saying, "You're so dirty, you'll make the river dirty if you swim with us!" These and other stories are on the Tapori website. Many children participate in Tapori activities with support from classroom teachers, parents, or other adults in their communities. Sometimes, these Tapori facilitators are people who had the chance to take part in Tapori when they themselves were children.

At the heart of Tapori are children and families living in situations of poverty. ATD Fourth World-**All Together in Dignity**, a non-profit group founded in 1957, coordinates the Tapori Network. It brings together people of different cultures and social classes to work on grassroots projects that promote the rights to education, health, work, housing, and civic participation. Based on the conviction that wherever anyone is condemned to live in poverty, human rights are being violated, ATD Fourth World works to influence policy by sharing the experiences and voices of people living in poverty. It has consultative status with UNICEF.

When children living in poverty have a chance to speak out about their own lives, they often stress how they feel hurt, not only when they personally are bullied or looked down on, but also when others treat their parents with disrespect. Sometimes, this disrespect

stems from generations of prejudice. At other times, the disrespect is an unintended consequence of well-meaning pity. People who are outraged to see children in poverty may translate that outrage into placing blame on the parents: "It's their fault, there must be more they could do."

Katia Blake, whose family has for many years participated actively in ATD Fourth World in the United States, shared her story with Tapori. She became very upset when her teacher criticized Mrs. Blake for failing to get Katia to school on time, which the teacher believed meant Mrs. Blake was not taking good care of Katia. In fact, Katia's lateness began when Mrs. Blake found extra work in the early morning, selling flowers in the street. Because Mrs. Blake left for work before her children started school, Katia took on the responsibility of getting her younger sisters ready for school. Katia could see that her mother was working longer hours than ever before, and it didn't make sense to her that her teacher would characterize Mrs. Blake as being irresponsible. As soon as the teacher spoke to Mrs. Blake about Katia's lateness, Mrs. Blake quit the extra job in order to be sure that Katia's schooling would not suffer. Despite getting to school on time, Katia found it difficult to concentrate in the class of a teacher she had heard insult her mother. One of the reasons that children like Katia appreciate having a public voice through Tapori is to have the opportunity share their perceptions of their own families.





Ang Galing is about reaching out to children where they live and play and is visible to anyone

Around 100 families are living under this bridge, above a water canal



The Philippines is one of the 34 countries where ATD runs grassroots projects. The following Taporí story, “Awesome!,” comes from a community of informal homes on the underside of a bridge. Since 1989, ATD Fourth World has run cultural and educational activities for the children there, and has organized Community Forums for the adults to meet adults from other parts of the city in order to express their ideas and participate in community life. “Ang Galing,” meaning “awesome!” in the local Tagalog language, is the name of our literacy project there. It offers a positive learning experience for children who struggle academically, or who are not attending school at all. Some may have dropped

out during the school year or may not have been able to enroll. Coordinated by Guy Malfait, a member of ATD Fourth World’s full-time volunteer corps, this literacy project takes place both in the community under this bridge and also in a large public cemetery, where many homeless families live in order to act as informal caretakers of the mausoleums. All the program facilitators are volunteering their time. Some of them are from the community and know firsthand how hard it can be to learn when daily life is a struggle. By emphasizing a personal relationship with each child and her or his family, “Ang Galing!” increases children’s self-confidence.

“AWESOME!”

Written by **Marie Ricana**, based on notes by **Guy Malfait**

“Hello? Hello?”

“Ah, Kuya¹ Marko, it’s you.” The voice came from one side of the shanty. Marko saw a small woman he recognized as Ate² Luz sitting on a wooden stool. A big plastic tub full of suds was in front of her for her work as a laundress. She called out to her son, “Ronnie! Kuya Marko is here!”

A 6-year-old boy carrying a baby peeked out from behind an old piece of plywood. A big smile appeared on his face. “Kuya Marko, Kuya Marko!”

Marko waved at the boy, “Hi, Ronnie! Give me five!” Marko turned back to the boy’s mother. “Ate Luz, you know, every Wednesday we run the Ang Galing workshop for children.³ Can Ronnie join in again?”

Ate Luz, her head bent over the laundry, didn’t answer for a while. Finally, she sighed, looking up with a torn expression. “To be honest, Kuya Marko, I wish I could say yes. But it’s just not possible today. I have nobody else to take

care of the baby. You see all the clothes in the tub? Until I finish and get paid for this, I won’t have any food to serve my kids for lunch. Sorry.”

Hearing his mother, Ronnie looked crushed. Although Marko was disappointed as well, he understood Ate Luz’s decision. Her husband spent long hours every day trying to sell bottled water or cigarettes to drivers stuck in traffic; he would not be back until the highway emptied out, late in the evening. Because Ronnie was the oldest of her four children, she had to depend on him to help out while she tried to earn some money, too.

Suddenly, Marko had an idea. “Ate Luz, wait a second, please?” Getting out his cellphone, Marko sent a text message to his teammates, who were already beginning the Ang Galing literacy workshop with other children. A minute later, the answering text brought a smile to his face.

“Ate, what if today I tutor Ronnie inside your room instead of joining the group? It won’t take too long.”

Ate Luz hesitated, many questions on her mind. How would someone as tall as Marko fit alongside the rest of



Games and puzzles are used to facilitate learning and to keep it attractive and joyful



Mothers of the community are actively involved in the program, facilitating the teaching sessions



There are meetings and workshops for the parents of Ang Galing children

them, already crowded in one room of just two square meters? Would her children behave well? What would Marko think of the dirt, impossible to get rid of in a dark shanty under a bridge? At the same time, seeing how excited Ronnie and the younger children were, Ate Luz couldn't turn them down.

As Ronnie squealed with delight, Marko smiled to himself. Only one student instead of dealing with the whole group would be a piece of cake for once!

Twenty minutes later, Marko had to admit to himself that tutoring Ronnie at home was definitely harder than he had expected. Marko was squatting in the center of the cramped room, with Ronnie on one side, his two younger siblings on his other side, and the baby sleeping on a piece of cardboard in a corner. Despite it being late morning, not enough light reached this shanty built under a bridge for it to be possible to read or write. So Ronnie lit a candle to help them see during the lesson.

This tiny home beneath the bridge, wedged among many similar homes, was directly above the waters of a

canal. Marko knew that if his pencils or paper slid through the slatted bamboo floor, they would be lost in the murky waters below. "Last time, we practiced the vowels, didn't we? Can you remember them?"

Ronnie nodded. Taking the pencil and paper that Marko held out, Ronnie wrote very slowly but precisely: "a – e – i – o – u."

"Are you sure you didn't forget one?" Marko teased.

The boy nodded, but after a second shook his head, "Umm, am I wrong?"

"Not at all! Awesome, Ronnie, you are a fast learner! You have to trust yourself because I trust you, too." He gave the boy's shoulder a warm squeeze.

Ronnie finally smiled. But just as he opened his mouth to reply they heard the baby start to cry. At first soft and tentative, the cries soon became insistent. "She's hungry, wait a minute," Ronnie said, standing up. In the corner of the room he took a baby bottle, scooped powdered milk into it, and then added some water. Shaking the bottle with one hand, he deftly lifted the baby from her cardboard

bed with his other. After a minute, he sat down on the floor again, cradling his sister as she drank.

"Sorry, Kuya Marko. But can we continue the lesson now?"

"Too bad, Ronnie," Marko sighed. "Everything I prepared is for you to practice writing." He thought for a moment. "Here, let me hold the baby, so you can still write." But the baby didn't recognize Marko. The moment he touched the infant's soft skin, she immediately burst into tears.

Ronnie and Marko looked at each other, crestfallen. They knew that it wouldn't work. Marko tried to cheer up the disappointed boy, "Don't worry, Ronnie, we'll do more next time. But what if I leave some of the exercises for you to do on your own? I want you to finish them before my next visit, okay?"

The boy brightened. "Wow, homework, just like children get in school?" Ronnie liked the idea. It felt important.

"Yup, just like homework." Getting to his feet, Marko gave Ronnie a smile and thumbs up. "Do we have a deal?"

Ronnie grinned. "Deal!"

* * *

"Mama, mama? Are you sleeping?"

Ate Luz opened her eyes. She hadn't even realized that she had begun dozing while listening to music on the radio and massaging liniment oil into her aching joints.

For a moment, Ate Luz felt abandoned. With her husband's work keeping him away from early morning until very late at night, the days alone with the children were much too long. What would she do without Ronnie?

"Mama?" Ronnie was worried. His mother's face had unexpectedly hardened.

A burst of a new melody on the radio startled Ate Luz.

"Sana'y di magmaliw ang dati kong araw

Nang munti pang bata sa piling ni Nanay. . . ."

The lyrics ended her dark reverie. What had she been thinking? Only 6 years old, her son was too young to carry the burden of an adult! And had she forgotten her vow? Ate Luz remembered Ronnie's birth, when she had sworn to herself that she would do anything for him to have a better life than she did.

"Mama, are you OK?" The look on his mother's face scared Ronnie.

Ate Luz blinked back tears to give Ronnie a smile. "Okay, okay, I'm fine. I just feel so exhausted today." Looking at the tracing exercise sheets on the floor, she asked, "What's that?"

Hesitantly, the boy gave his mother his homework. "It's the assignment Kuya Marko gave me: to practice writing by tracing the letters and numbers. It's so easy, Mama! As soon as the baby fell asleep, I was able to do the whole thing!"

Ate Luz remembered that Ronnie had been bent to work over these papers when she was ironing laundry and the baby slept. Now, Ate Luz looked over the exercises, finding nothing wrong. As she turned the pages, her heart swelled with pride. "Awesome, Ronnie! You've traced everything perfectly. Oh, but there's one small error here—in spelling your name."

"Oh no! Sorry, mama." Ronnie looked upset.

"It's okay, you're on such a good track, you'll get it all soon," Ate Luz hugged the boy close. "Just practice again before bedtime."

* * *

"Hello? Hello?"

On Marko's next visit a few days later, he was puzzled. Ate Luz wasn't in her usual place for the laundry—outside near the water tap. Was she sick? A neighbor waved Marko toward the dark, narrow corridor that led between the dwellings under the bridge. Sure enough, there was Ate Luz in the corridor. Bent over her washtub, she was doing laundry as usual. But why in the dark, and so far from the water tap? Water was heavy to carry all this way.

As Marko wondered, he could hear Ronnie and his brothers calling his name from behind the plywood wall separating the family's home from the corridor. Ate Luz was trying to inch the laundry tub out of the way to give Marko a few centimeters of space.

Just then, two legs appeared from above, climbing down a small ladder into the corridor. It was Ate Myra, carrying Ate Luz's baby in her arms. Marko knew Ate Myra well. Her son took part in the Ang Galing program last year, and was now enrolled in school.

"Finally, she's sound asleep!" said Ate Myra. "Oh, Kuya Marko, sorry I didn't see you there. How are you?"

"Still running Ang Galing for the kids, every Wednesday." Turning hesitantly toward Ate Luz, Marko

asked softly, "Do you think that this time Ronnie might be able to join us outside?"

Ronnie was looking at his mother hopefully.

Ate Luz smiled, "Sure, no problem! Just put on a clean shirt first."

"Are you sure, Mama? But what about the baby?"

"That's why I'm doing the laundry in here! I can watch all the other children from here. And Ate Myra has promised to help me if the baby is fussing. We talked it over last night. Now hurry up and put on your flip flops, Ronnie. Kuya Marko is waiting for you!"

Smiling gratefully at both women, Marko said, "Thank you so much! And Ate Myra, it's wonderful that you're always ready to help out a neighbor."

"That's what makes us all friends!" She smiled back.

"Thank you for what you're doing for our children!"

As soon as Ronnie had followed Marko out of the corridor to where other children were gathering for the Ang Galing workshop, he showed Marko his finished homework.

"Good job, Ronnie!" Marko said, looking at the papers.

"Mama said it's all correct." Marko nodded.

"Except for my name," Ronnie said, pointing to where he had crossed it out. "But then she taught me the correct spelling. Here, look." He turned the page over to show a series of crossed out names, except for the last one, spelled correctly. "I always forget, but Mama says it's just a matter of practice, and then I will remember it." Ronnie laughed self-consciously.

"Wow, awesome! You love your mother a lot, don't you?"

Ronnie nodded, with a wide grin. "That's for sure!"

The End

Notes

¹ In the Tagalog language of the Philippines, Kuya means big brother and is a respectful way to address a man.

² Ate means big sister and is a respectful way to address a woman.

³ Ang Galing, which means awesome in Tagalog, is the name of a literacy program run by ATD Fourth World.

⁴ "Hoping that those days of my childhood moments / Spent with my mother / Never would be lost or fade."

To learn more, please visit www.tapori.org/site/en



A World at School

Over 59 million children around the world are out of primary school.

Every day, youth face violence on their way to school or are under the threat of attack. Barriers to young people achieving their right to an education, such as early forced marriage, child labor, discrimination against girls, emergency and conflict situations, and lack of quality schools and teachers, remain rampant. Below are two stories of young people who faced adversity when trying to go to school and are now education campaigners working to stop this pattern from continuing.

By Madeline Serena
Senior Project Coordinator for
A World at School



Education in Conflict and Emergency Situations

Children around the world are unable to go to school because of conflict or emergency situations. Over 5 million children were out of school in Ebola-affected countries and are still facing difficulties as schools slowly reopen. Countless children are kidnapped or even killed in Nigeria and Pakistan because militants know that educating a young person is the biggest threat to their operations. In areas of Syria and Nepal, where war and natural disasters shutter schools, education is not even an option.



Trokon, from Liberia, is one such youth, whose education was interrupted due to war. Here is his story:

I was born a year before Liberia’s civil war took over the country. At age 7, I was put in an orphanage as an Internally Displaced Child in a camp outside the city of Buchanan. Imagine a year later, a young child growing up on the streets, sleeping in market kitchens and on beaches in Monrovia—it became a desperate situation for me.

Thanks to a Catholic-run humanitarian organization, Don Bosco Home, I left the street to live in a home where food, shelter, caring adults, and primary education were available to me. Since I showed a passion for learning, Don Bosco Home provided funding that allowed me to stay in school. The Home served as parent for me, playing a major role in my completing secondary education, especially meaningful in a post-conflict nation where most youth remain illiterate.

Primary education in Liberia is still a problem despite the government regulation for free and compulsory education in all public schools. Millennium Development Goal 2 was not achieved, as corruption attacks our education system, and untrained teachers and undermined budgetary appropriations for new schools remain the norm.

In 2008, I graduated from the Salvation Army school in Monrovia. Because of financial constraints, I waited three years to attend university. During this time, in an effort to advocate for street children and make sure that young people are in school and learning, and recognizing the positive effect of education on my own life, I founded the Liberia Youth Network on Education.

Presently, I’m at university studying criminal justice so I can go to law school. I plan on representing the legal interests of street children and the most vulnerable in society.

I’m able to use my voice to call on governments, NGOs, donors, and other stakeholders to double their efforts in support of education.

Discrimination Against Girls

Each year, 31 million girls are denied an education simply because they are girls. Parents who cannot afford to



educate more than one child often choose boys. In other families, girls are forced into labor or early marriages.



Caroline, from Uganda, was one of these girls. She believes that the “right to education is a basic human right—one that aims to strengthen understanding, tolerance, friendship, and peace among all nations, races, and religious groups.” Her story follows:

Most parents assume that some children cannot learn, even if they had the opportunity to attend school. They think it would be a waste of time and money because at the end of it all they won’t be able to achieve anything. That is what my stepmother thought, and that is how she convinced my father to take me out of school. Most of the girl children in Uganda have been victims of this assumption and they have ended up losing out on education. Luckily, I had a narrow escape. My mother didn’t have much education, but she wanted to see her daughter benefit from it.

For girls lucky enough to receive an education, many are not permitted to study beyond the secondary level. Many believe young women should be married before age 20, bear children, and stay at home to raise the children while her man is out earning money. In Uganda, the ultimate role of a girl is to be a good wife. The education needed for that role is traditional and not learned in schools.

Parents living in poverty, then, often ask, “Why keep her in school when after so much spending, all she is

going to do is to cook, clean, and bear children?” So they consider the best option to be investing in the boy’s education because he will be working for his clan and family.

I spent a year out of school because my father came to believe that investing in me would be a waste of time and money. Luckily, my mother believed differently and she single-handedly supported my education. But not every girl is as lucky as I am. Many girls are being pulled out of school. They are married off too young and they are made to believe that that is all they were born to do. This has to change!

Both Caroline and Trokon are now A World at School Global Youth Ambassadors, a group of young people from all over the world with the interest, passion, and dedication to be part of the global education solution. They were able to use their past to show others the power of education and the plight of millions of children struggling to obtain one.

Now that you have been inspired, what can you do to contribute to making education a reality for every child? There are countless ways you can make a difference, like Caroline and Trokon are doing. The power of the youth voice is limitless. Use the Youth Global Monitoring Report (<http://www.upforschool.org/eduverdict>) to find education facts and advocacy tips to create your own education campaign.

You can also join our Youth Ambassadors, partners, and campaigners around the world who are working together on the #UpForSchool petition. We are all collecting signatures to deliver to world leaders, demanding they keep a promise they made to get every girl and boy into school and learning. Join the movement by going to www.upforschool.org.

A World at School is a digital mobilization initiative working to achieve global education by providing a platform to coordinate campaigns, share information, and forge collaborations to challenge issue- and country-specific barriers to education and effect lasting change.



A Portrait of Kindness

By Ryan and Cheridyn Egan
Memory Project

A 16- or 17-year-old created this!?! exclaimed José as he studied a painted portrait of Ignacio, one of the 107 children living in the children's home that José directs in Paraguay. After receiving his portrait, Ignacio had run to show it to José. When José looked at the beautiful piece of art, he turned it over to discover an attached picture of the artist, an American teenager.



Nicaragua

José pointed to the artist and clarified: "So you are telling me that most of the artists are high school students who are just learning portraiture? This portrait looks just like Ignacio!" José smiled and handed the artwork back to 10-year-old Ignacio, who excitedly raced inside the house to show his friends. This is just one of many similar reactions we have observed when delivering portraits for the Memory Project.

A 501(c)(3) started by Ben Schumaker in 2004, the Memory Project is dedicated to helping art students create portraits for orphaned, neglected, or disadvantaged children around the world. The project idea was sparked by a conversation Ben had with an older gentleman while Ben was volunteering in a children's home in Guatemala. The man had grown up in a children's home and reflected that he had no pictures or keepsakes from when he was a child. Ben, an artist who enjoys portraiture and wants to make a difference in children's lives, merged these two personal passions into what is now the Memory Project.

To date, artists have created more than 80,000 portraits for children in 38 countries. Through their work, the young art students also learn about a new part of the world and about the various circumstances affecting the children's lives—lives quite different from their own. Without a doubt, the artists are deeply impacted, and make a permanent connection to the children and their countries. For the recipients, the handmade portraits not only are unique gifts that capture snapshots of their childhoods, but also contribute to their sense of identity and personal heritage.

Being the couriers of such special gifts is quite an incredible and unique opportunity. When we arrive at the children's homes, the children often have no idea why we are there or what we

carry with us in our unassuming duffel bags. As we pull out the first set of portraits, excited giggles and smiles emerge as the children immediately recognize the faces portrayed in the artwork. We ask if anyone remembers having a photograph taken the previous year. Most children shake their heads no, so we take the opportunity to talk about the project and what was done with the children's photos when they were sent to us.

We explain that art students from far away took the time to create portraits especially for them. We tell the children that each portrait is unique and that a variety of artistic techniques were employed: some artists chose watercolor or oil paints, while others used pencil or even digital-art software. We ask the children if any of them enjoy making art and if they have ever created a portrait.

The excitement is palpable as we explain that the portrait is for the child to keep as a special memory of childhood and that we will take a photograph of each child with their portrait. As we deliver the portraits, we



Paraguay

strive to capture the experience to share with the artists. In addition to taking photos, we film the occasion to create a short video. By viewing the photos and videos, the art students can experience the children's joy even from thousands of miles away. Because we have encountered many misconceptions about the children who live in the homes we visit, we also use the photos and videos to help artists understand the realities of these children's lives.

When the children first view their portraits, we see reactions as diverse as the countries where we work. We are overwhelmed by the excitement and joy that arise, especially among the younger children, when we pull out the cameras and portraits. They tend to giggle when they realize they are looking at portraits of themselves. As we start to snap pictures, we hear both laughter and

an endless stream of "thank you, gracias, merci, kap khun ka, danyabad," and the like. Sometimes, we even receive hugs from the little ones.

Teenagers can be a bit more introspective. When they are photographed receiving their portraits, the teenagers may act somewhat shy or even embarrassed, as few teens like to have their pictures taken in front of friends. Later, after the cameras have been put away, we find the teenagers intently studying their portraits alone or with a few friends. They often approach us to ask questions about the artists or to have us read or translate messages written on the back of the artwork. Sometimes, they want to confirm that they really get to keep the portraits. Often, a talented artist lives in the children's home and wants to show us his/her own artwork.



Paraguay



Haiti

In our experience, most children love seeing pictures of themselves, even if just on the tiny screen of a digital camera. The Memory Project takes this pleasure a step further, because after we snap quick photos of them holding their portraits, the children retain beautiful, personalized pieces of art that were created especially for them. Even if some portraits fade over time, their value to the children will continue to grow.

We are constantly amazed by the sustained support we receive from teachers and students located around the United States as well as in a handful of other countries. Many art teachers participate in the Memory Project year after year and regularly tell us how much they and their students enjoy the experience. Each individual portrait surpasses a simple class project in portraiture, truly serving as a special gift—a portrait of kindness.

As we took leave of the children's home in Paraguay, José bid us farewell and, per Paraguayan custom, shared a few words of appreciation: "This project means a lot, as it marks an important stage in their lives. They will always

have these portraits as special keepsakes. Thank you to all the artists who made these beautiful gifts for our children."



Nepal

Since 2009, Ryan and Cheridyn have delivered more than 35,000 portraits to children in 18 countries. When not traveling for the Memory Project, they lead three-month experiential education programs for Carpe Diem International Education.





Structural Changes in Schooling: The Need of the Times in India

By Manasi Pande
Consultant, Early Childhood Development
United Nations Children's Education Fund (UNICEF)

Shilpa, 11 years old, wakes up at 4:30 a.m. every morning.

Still sleepy, she cleans the house (her family lives in a slum in the heart of Delhi, India's rich capital), makes tea, and begins preparing food for her entire family. After her father, who works as a rickshaw puller, and mother, who is a domestic worker, leave at 6 a.m., Shilpa feeds and clothes her 5- and 7-year-old siblings and makes her way to the local school with them in tow. Sitting at her desk in class, she relaxes for the first time since waking up and soon falls asleep, missing most of the day's lessons. "I like coming to school," she says. "But I do not know how long I will study. My mother has been saying that she needs me to be home so that someone can look after my brother and sister and the house." Not even a teenager yet, Shilpa does not harbor any illusions about what her future will be.

While Shilpa sleeps undisturbed, Kusum, the only qualified instructor at a primary school of 164 students, spends more time disciplining the children than teaching them. Officially, the school employs three teachers, but the other two teachers are routinely absent these days because of election duties mandated by the state government. Kusum complains about the burden of work she has to bear. The amount of work makes it difficult to manage the school effectively. "I often have to combine two or three classes together. In the present system, we can look after the children but not educate them," says Kusum.

The school building is a concrete, *pukka* (permanent) construction, but is poorly maintained: cobwebs lining the stairwells, piles of paper, broken desks, broken glass panes, and a leaking roof inspire little confidence. Irregular electricity supply makes studying conditions unbearable during the stifling summer months. Even when Shilpa can stay awake, it is hardly surprising that she can learn very little. Kusum looks on in exasperation and says, "The law can bring them to school, but how do we keep them here, especially the girls?"

These stories reflect a system that is failing our children. The roadblocks are obvious—until we have a social support system for young boys and girls like Shilpa, and provide the right schooling environment, India's social and economic progress is going to falter.

An Innovative Approach

The situation is desperate. Many girls like Shilpa eventually drop out of school, yet they know that education is important. While they cannot abandon their family responsibilities, they try to find ways to fit school around their busy work schedules. Their hopes for being educated may rest on an innovative alternative option now available to them: an NGO-run Bridge Course Programme tailored to the local environment.

The aim of this program is to provide basic reading, writing, and numeracy skills to children in the community. Mindful of the needs of children like Shilpa, the program has adopted a more practical curriculum; it

allows for flexible schedules and relies more on informal instruction methods. For two hours every morning, usually from 7-9 a.m., out-of-school children in the community are taught from the regular school textbook through techniques devised by the NGO for teaching this population; after a year or two, they are encouraged to join the formal school.

Rani, who dropped out of school two years ago to look after her younger siblings, recently joined the NGO-run school. She recounts her unpleasant experience with formal schooling: "I was very young then. I did not like it. The teacher did not teach—she often slept while sitting in her chair!" She also mentions how she was unable to attend the government school because she could not manage the regular school hours due to increasing responsibilities at home. Today, Rani's eyes light up as she talks about the NGO-run school. She has many friends at school with whom she likes to play and sing songs; Rani also likes her teacher, who encourages her to study. She shares her dream of becoming a teacher when she grows up. Flexible school schedules allow her to do housework and look after her siblings, balancing work and school. This new arrangement may save a future, making it possible for a young mind to fulfill an aspiration.

Community Engagement and Partnership

The teacher in the NGO-run school, Pushpa, seems deeply involved in her work, speaking to each child caringly and taking a personal interest in their family situations and problems. Often, she fetches children from their homes to attend class. She says, "There is a lot of poverty here. Fathers and mothers must make a living, so the children have to do the housework. They know education is important, but they also have their needs. I was one of them, I myself attended these classes before I joined the formal school," she says. After being trained by the NGO for a few months, Pushpa is now a volunteer teacher in the Bridge Course school, while continuing to study in the formal school. She emphasizes that she is part of the community where she is trying to bring change. This circle of learning is a significant feature of the campaign. Most learners are encouraged to contribute simultaneously to the program, and thus to



the education of their community, by becoming teachers; this also nurtures their spirit of volunteerism and their pride in the community.

This program is a small-scale, voluntary initiative by the NGO, with little collaboration from the formal education sector as yet. Recently introduced in the community, the program has been pilot tested and evaluated. While initial results are positive, the model must be studied in greater detail.

Going Beyond the Numbers: Understanding Needs

Accountability and incentives promise metamorphosis. In India, many schoolteachers are under-trained, under-qualified, and under-compensated. Therefore, they are demotivated instruments of a mechanical system of education. Without ensuring local accountability of teachers and rewarding performance, challenges affecting quality cannot be addressed. Bringing children like Rani and Shilpa into the fold of an educational experience is not merely a matter of conducting enrollment drives. It requires very special effort and care, as well as continuous mobilization within the community, so that their faith in their own abilities and that of education providers can be restored.

Education policy also needs to allow for flexible or nonformal schooling systems in communities where socio-economic or cultural context may not allow children to attend mainstream schools. Second chance programs are, for the most part, small-scale and fragmented and are not part of a coherent strategy to educate out-of-

school young people in India. The high costs of operating such systems may be a deterrent. Thus, there is a need for innovative solutions and effective partnerships. Providing a system of well-targeted second chances by reaching out to NGOs or the private sector can facilitate enrollment. The government must become an enabler, if not necessarily the provider, of such programs.

Coordinated Policies

Moving beyond education policy measures, we also must try to understand the social realities of families in which children take on “work” responsibilities. Government schemes often ignore the fact that providing “free” schooling does not ensure that poor children will not drop out after enrolling. The decision to drop out is a complex process involving a range of factors in a child’s personal life and family, and the school environment that may be available to them. The voices of Shilpa and Rani, and of many other boys and girls, suggest the need for a new perspective on why children drop out of school—the need to understand the complexities of their lives that otherwise go unnoticed. Until that happens, the right to education will be merely a policy triumph for the Indian government and girls like Shilpa and Rani will remain a statistic—sometimes for enrolling, but more often than not for subsequently dropping out. Finally, it is the communities and local institutions (local universities, researchers) that hold the key. They can ensure that school authorities are held accountable and that policies are not developed in a vacuum. Empowering them could go a long way toward elevating the condition of education in India.



Heike’s Belly Project: Three-Year-Olds’ Inquiry Into Their Teacher’s Pregnancy

By Eva L. Essa, Bridget A. Walsh,
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In response to the persistent curiosity of a group of 3-year-olds about their teacher Heike’s growing belly, student intern Jennifer planned a discussion with a small group of children. She asked the children, “What is happening inside Heike’s belly?” and “How can we find out more information?” The children eagerly shared their ideas, both verbally and in drawings.

Leilani noted, “A baby is inside.” Mahalia added, “A tiny baby.” Leilani continued to explain, “The baby is lying down and watching TV.” Discussing their drawings, Anna explained, “I put some pants and a shirt on the baby,” and Thomas said, “It does not have clothes on.” Early in the project, Heike told the children that she had a doctor’s appointment. They wanted Heike to ask the doctor some questions, such as, “Does the baby want to be rocked?” “Is it a boy or a girl?” “How tall is the baby?” and “How does the baby eat?” These initial conversations developed into a four-month-long project about Heike’s belly in which many concepts were explored and developed.

Projects provide a useful method for exploring a range of subjects, including creative and sensitive ones. Young children are curious about many topics; adults may be uncomfortable discussing some of them. Jennifer’s exploration of the children’s interest in their teacher’s pregnancy illustrates how early childhood teachers can address sensitive topics through projects, which involve carefully listening to and honoring the children’s questions, ideas, and theories. When the topic of pregnancy is investigated with 3-year-olds in an appropriate way, preschoolers’ understanding that the baby grows, moves, eats, and breathes inside the mother increases. Children who actively construct ideas about unborn babies often draw upon what is familiar to them, such as the idea that the baby always existed in Heike’s tummy. It is easy for an adult to dismiss such notions as misinformation. Thinking of children’s theories as part of their meaning-making process, however, can guide how adults listen to children. The following account of Heike’s Belly Project demonstrates how visible listening and careful documentation allowed Jennifer to deepen and expand the children’s understanding in multiple ways.

The Project

Jennifer noticed that the children had a strong interest in the size of the baby. Naomi, for instance, observed, “Our tummies are small and Heike’s is big.” Jennifer asked the children, “How can we measure the baby?” Anna considered the question and then said, “We can have a measuring stick to measure Heike’s belly.” Several other children embellished on Anna’s suggestion, and suggested using

a ribbon to go around Heike’s belly. Eventually, this last solution was implemented. The children used a different color ribbon to test the size of Heike’s belly each week, then measured the ribbon and charted the measurement to keep track. The ribbons were attached to the chart to offer comparisons.



Following up on the children’s suggestion, Jennifer provided a measuring tape and a chart on which to keep track of Heike’s growing belly each week.

Jennifer provided other ways to learn about the topic. A stethoscope enabled the children to listen to the baby’s, Heike’s, and each others’ heartbeats. They also were able to examine ultrasound pictures and videos, which the children viewed often. After carefully listening, Parker concluded that the sound she heard was the baby’s heart. She asked, “What does the heartbeat look like?” Careful examination of the ultrasound helped the children see the heart and how it moved. Laurel said, “I have a baby inside my tummy, too. Can you hear it? Maybe the baby fell asleep inside my tummy. The doctor will check.” As she watched the ultrasound, Anna excitedly exclaimed, “This is the baby’s foot.” Parker added, “I like to watch it move like that. That is awesome!” She further hypothesized that the baby’s heart beat when the baby kicked.

Eventually, the children expanded their exploration to socio-dramatic play involving the doctor’s office, baby nurseries, and caring for babies. Jennifer asked the children, “What do doctors and nurses do when someone comes in with a baby in their belly?” She asked the children what they would need in a doctor’s office, and



Heike shared her ultrasound from the doctor’s appointment with the children. They were fascinated while watching the screen, pointing out parts of the baby and watching it move around. They especially enjoyed listening to the recording of its heart beat.



The children listened to Heike’s, the baby’s, and each others’ hearts to see if they could hear the beat with the stethoscopes Jennifer provided.

gradually introduced props to encourage their dramatic play. “Are you ready to check the baby, Dr. Anna?” Anna replied, “We are just checking out the baby. It is doing pretty good.” Laurel added, “Maybe the baby fell asleep in the tummy. We can ask the doctor to check.” The children got a blanket on which to place another patient. After listening with the stethoscope, Leilani said, “You have a baby in your belly, so let me listen. . . . I hear something!”

The children also contemplated the physical layout of the doctor’s office. They visited the office of their child care



The children’s experience continued to deepen through dramatic play. They had more opportunity to explore different roles and were provided scaffolding by Jennifer so they could better understand these roles.



The children looked at pictures taken on their field trip to get ideas for drawing their doctor’s office sign. They used Anna’s two-sided model for a sign.

center to see what a reception area looked like. Eventually, a receptionist’s room, doctor’s examining room, and baby nursery were created out of medical props, blocks, and other items. At one point, Anna needed to make a new appointment for one of the patients. Leilani wondered, “How will people know it is open?” This question led to further discussion and activity, and the decision that they needed a sign. Jennifer encouraged the children to find and take photos of signs in their environment. They then studied the signs to discern their meaning. They found a sign that said “Open,” but decided that they

needed a two-sided sign with the words “Open” and “Closed.” Emilio was excited to discover, “There’s an E in it! You can see my E. It is right here.” He also showed Parker that the word “open” included a P. After the children finished making the sign, they integrated it into their dramatic play activities “to let people know when to come in.”

As part of the project, the children also had opportunities to draw the baby inside Heike’s belly. Jennifer provided circular pieces of paper, sized to match Heike’s belly. Anna checked to see how her baby doll would fit in the circle. She noticed that it needed to be “squished” in order to fit. Laurel paid close attention to the parts and details of the doll and transferred them to her drawing. “His feet are at his head. . . . This is where his heart is. . . . Here is his nose and these are the feet. . . . That is his hair.” Laurel indicated that the baby in her drawing was sleeping.

“This is a pillow so it’s cozy in there. When it gets chilly, she puts the blanket on herself. She is a girl because she has eyelashes.”

The children also were curious about how the baby would come out of Heike’s belly. Emilio thought that a baby has a ball that it “pushes up, up, up,” and that the baby then follows out. Parker thought the baby would come out of Heike’s mouth, while Anna envisioned a special machine to make the baby emerge. Both Laurel and Leilani noted that “the baby will pop out.” Laurel also thought that the baby was very little at first, then grows bigger and bigger until it is ready to come out.

A theme of caring became evident in the children’s dramatic play. In the nursery, which they had set up by their doctor’s office, babies were checked and cared for.



There was excitement as children found familiar letters in the words; for instance, Emilio found an “E” in the picture of the “open” sign that the children had photographed.



Jennifer provided each child an oval piece of paper and a baby doll to see what different positions the baby may be in. They needed to scrunch the baby or position it accordingly to fit inside the paper. They showed Heike how they thought the baby was positioned in her tummy.

Before visiting the infant classroom, Jennifer reminded the children that they were going to be the “big kids” and shared how they could help take care of the babies. The visit was an enjoyable experience for all—the 3-year-olds and the babies.



Anna cautioned everyone, “Shhh! The babies are sleeping.” “My baby was thirsty. He drank both of the bottles,” said Emilio. Laurel asked, “Now what is your baby doing? Is it yawning? Is something wrong with her?” “My baby is sick. She has a cold. I need to change her diaper,” Leilani said. “Will you look at the baby’s temperature? We have a sick baby.” Later, Anna said, “Your baby is done being sick. I gave it to the nurse and she fixed it.”

As an outgrowth of taking care of babies through dramatic play, the children became interested in how to care for real babies. In their child care center, the infant classroom is across the hall from the 3-year-olds’ class. Jennifer consulted with the infant teachers to set up a visit to the baby room. Prior to the visit, Jennifer helped the children formulate some questions to ask the infant teachers. “Can we play with the babies? Can we help them walk up the stairs?” Anna wondered. Laurel suggested, “Maybe we can help them shake our hands.” Just before their visit, Parker told her classmates, “You need to be really, really quiet so they don’t freak out.” The babies and the 3-year-olds enjoyed the visit, holding hands, giggling together, and smiling at each other. Afterward, Jennifer asked the children what they thought about the experience. Anna exclaimed, “I loved it!” and Parker added, “It was an adventure!” The children then discussed how they could tell the babies “Thank you” for allowing them to visit; they decided to draw pictures about the visit as a thank-you gift.

Throughout this exploration, Heike’s baby became more real to the children. Laurel said, “We should make a big plan about the baby in Heike’s belly.” Anna suggested, “Let’s make a surprise for her baby . . . a birthday cake!” Parker thought the children should make a crib for the baby, to which Leilani added, “We could put a blanket in it.” Although the project continued only until the end of the semester, which was also when Heike’s baby was born, the children’s interest continued well beyond that time. Their (now former) teacher Heike brings the baby for periodic visits and their new teacher continues to encourage their interest in babies, mommies, and doctors.

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Inclusive Education in Pakistan: Story of Two Sisters' Courage

For the past few years, Pakistan has experienced severe attacks on education. A variety of unfortunate circumstances are making it harder for children, specifically children with special needs in remote areas, to gain an education. In recent years, debate about inclusive education in developing countries has been growing. Research studies show that children with disabilities are more vulnerable to violence and sexual and physical abuse. Socially and emotionally impaired children are also more likely to be abducted and used in terrorist acts around the world. Lack of education makes it easier for these evil acts to be perpetrated on children. To prevent the next generation from becoming victims, we need to provide education for all children in an inclusive setting.

**By Seema Ibrahim
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In Pakistan, children with disabilities are often deprived of an education—especially young girls. Many uneducated parents consider their disabled children to be a curse, and do not give them the attention or time they need. These children therefore suffer from the lack of their parents' love as well as a lack of medical diagnosis and treatment, resources, and of course, education. Thus, the children are less likely to live healthy, comfortable, and successful lives.

In 2014, a public army school in Peshawar was attacked; nearly 150 children and teachers were targeted and killed within the school premises. I wondered if the children who were hurt physically, emotionally, and socially in the attack needed an inclusive setting in which to learn. I discovered that several NGOs and international organizations have been successfully improving education in Pakistan. USAID, in particular, has been working in Pakistan to train teachers to teach children with special needs. Projects such as ENGAGE hold great promise for the possibility of inclusive education in Pakistan.

While doing research about such efforts, I found the website of an inclusive school, Kingston Inclusive Academy in Abbottabad, founded in 1999. It caught my interest as it is situated in a remote, northern area of Pakistan. I called the principal, Sardar Irfan, and inquired

about his philosophy on inclusive education. Mr. Irfan is running a successful inclusive school; children come from far and near and from all kinds of backgrounds. In his school, all children receive education together, in general education classrooms. The children help each other, respect each other, and understand each other's abilities and requirements. The goal of the school is to produce a healthy, inclusive society, where typically developing children and those with special needs play their roles in life together. All children are welcomed, including those with autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, and other physical or emotional challenges.

Mr. Irfan earned his master's in special education, and was inspired to start an inclusive school in Abbottabad by his own physically disabled teacher from high school. I was deeply impressed by the work of the teachers at the Kingston Inclusive Academy, who have been trained by Mr. Irfan and must operate with a lack of resources and very minimal government support. Mr. Irfan needs more experts in the field to train his staff and assess the children. Several of the children in his school have been physically and sexually abused, sometimes by their own family members. Because of this, Mr. Irfan began conducting self-defense classes to show his students how to protect themselves. He also introduced vocational classes to prepare the boys and girls to earn a living.



Boys learning to make furniture



Fiza with other girls, learning embroidery



Needlework class

While speaking with Mr. Irfan, I learned about two inspirational young sisters in his school who have physical challenges, and thus have special requirements for learning and coping with everyday life routines. I was deeply impressed by the courage and determination demonstrated by Fiza and her younger sister Khizra. Both girls are exceptionally talented, as are many other students at Kingston. Fiza and Khizra belong to a low-income family; their father does glass work and was educated up to 10th grade and their mother went to school only until 5th grade. Mr. Irfan offered the girls scholarships and convinced their father to send them to school. He explained how the education and experiences at his inclusive school will help the girls live healthy and successful lives. They started school at the very young ages of 6 and 7.

Fiza and Khizra start their day with prayers and help their mother prepare breakfast for the family. After breakfast, the sisters leave for school along with their two younger, typically developing brothers. After the school day ends, they go home and help their mother with household chores. They also help their brothers with their studies. Their father remains hesitant about allowing them to leave home for other activities, such as going to their friends' homes, to parties, to parks, or to debate competitions in other cities, fearing that people will make fun of his daughters and will hurt them emotionally and physically. Mr. Irfan encourages him to let the girls



Woodwork class

participate in activities outside of school, and to trust in his daughters' abilities. If we provide these children with an education and allow them to dream big, they may be able to make their dreams a reality. With good mentors and education facilitators, like Mr. Irfan, children can meet the challenges of their lives while journeying to gain an education.

Khizra is currently in 10th grade and Fiza is applying to the Virtual University to earn her master's degree in Urdu. Both girls are fast learners and very happy. They are talented in debate, poetry, arts, and embroidery. At Kingston, they have learned to be confident. They speak before large crowds and are a strong voice for all children with special needs. Fiza wants to become a teacher and open her own inclusive school. Khizra wants to become a doctor and help children with special needs. Both girls want to pursue their higher education overseas.



Khizra and Fiza

With the passion for learning and teaching that I witnessed in Mr. Irfan and the students of the Kingston Inclusive Academy, I am certain the literacy rate among Pakistani special needs children can increase. Despite challenges, teachers are willing to provide a healthy learning environment and children are eager to learn. And so I see much hope for a prosperous Pakistan. 🌞



Children during a play



Khizra on the balance beam



Khizra doing martial arts training



Fiza at a debate competition



Khizra helping other children



Kingston Inclusive Academy schoolchildren

Childhood Explorer

The **Association for Childhood Education International**, a nonprofit dedicated to promoting the optimal education and development of children, is proud to be offering this new publication that focuses specifically on the experience of childhood around the world. *Childhood Explorer* is an online vehicle for sharing informative and inspirational stories about childhood and about projects and campaigns that provide quality education, care, and support to children and youth in diverse communities and circumstances.

We invite you to submit short, 1- to 3-page, articles for consideration. We are seeking narrative, conversational articles that stay focused on a personal story of childhood, while connected to a global issue concerning childhood and children's education.

Visit <http://www.acei.org/childhood-explorer> for more information and to download guidelines and samples.

Topics of interest are:

Daily life of a child in a particular geographic location/culture/socioeconomic situation/life circumstance

NGO initiatives to support children's well-being and education

Programs/approaches and how they work through real-life application

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Exploring the Landscape of Childhood Worldwide
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