Spanish children's concerns for the future

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ABSTRACT  This paper reports on an international study which investigated the hopes and fears of children aged 9-11 for their personal, local and global futures, together with their understanding of key issues such as poverty, racism, the environment, health and conflict. The study indicates the extent to which children feel optimistic about the future, informed about key global issues and motivated to act for change.

In this paper we hear the voices of children from Spain. Spanish children’s concerns for both the local and global future are discussed as is their desire to be informed about such issues and involved in action for change. There are implications for curriculum content and service-learning activities involving community action. Findings also indicate the importance these children place on family and relationships, which is discussed in terms of the role both parents and teachers can play in effective education for citizenship.

I hope not to be alone… (girl)

I’m afraid that we’ll forget our dreams… (girl)

Introduction

Our work, as Professors of Education in the University of Navarra, has focussed on civic education and social participation; family relationships and the development of social skills in children along with teacher training and educational innovation in higher education. It was a logical extension of this to join the international study on children’s concerns for the future so that we could add the voices of Spanish children. We conducted the research ourselves in local schools.

Spain: the context

In order to provide a context for the study, we present below a summary of key facts about Spain:

Area: 504,782 sq km
Population: 40,397,842 (July 2006)
Religions: Roman Catholic 94%, other 6%
Languages: Castilian Spanish 74%, Catalan 17%, Galician 7%; note - Castilian is the official national language; the other languages are official regionally

Government: Parliamentary monarchy

Economy: The Spanish economy boomed from 1986 to 1990, averaging 5% annual growth. After a European-wide recession in the early 1990s, it resumed moderate growth in 1994. Spain's mixed capitalist economy supports a GDP that on a per capita basis is 80% that of the four leading West European economies. Despite the economy's relative solid footing significant risks remain, including Spain's continued loss of competitiveness, the potential for a housing market collapse, the country's changing demographic profile and a decline in EU structural funds. Unemployment was 8.7% in 2006 with nearly 20% of the population living below the poverty line.

Education: Primary education lasts for six years and compulsory secondary education for four years (from 12 to 16). Religious instruction must be available at all schools, but it is voluntary. Citizenship education is taught according to the new Law on Education, Ley Orgánica de Educación, LOE (2006) in the third cycle of primary education (pupils from 10 to 12), in one of the first three years of compulsory secondary education (12 to 15) where it is entitled “Education for citizenship and human rights”, in the fourth year of compulsory secondary education as “Ethical and civic education”, and as a common subject for all the different types of post-compulsory upper secondary education (16-18) under the title “Philosophy and citizenship”. However the curriculum time allowed for this subject is far shorter than that for other curricular areas, with a total of 50 hours in primary schools.

In primary education citizenship is structured into three blocks: Individuals and interpersonal and group relations; Life in a community; Living in society. This includes classic aspects of citizenship education (human rights and children’s rights; civic values; knowledge of constitutional principles; contribution through taxes; understanding defence in the service of peace), and new areas such as: gender equality; recognition of gender differences, social, cultural and religious diversity and identification of discrimination.

The sample

The Spanish sample is made up of 150 schoolchildren in their 5th year of Primary School; aged between 10 and 11 from both mixed sex and single-sex state-funded schools in Pamplona. The schools were:
- two coeducational schools with a medium socio-cultural level, situated in the centre of the city (82 pupils)
- one boys’ school with an upper-middle socio-cultural level, located in the suburbs (22 pupils)
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- one girls’ school with an upper-middle socio-cultural level, located in a residential area outside the city (26 pupils)
- one boys’ school with a low socio-cultural level in the suburbs (20 pupils).

The methodology for the study is described on page 4 in this journal.

Findings

Children were asked to consider whether their own life would be better, about the same or worse in the future on a five point scale. They were then asked to consider this for people in their local area and for those in other parts of the world.

Figure 1: Life in the future

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Personal</th>
<th>Local</th>
<th>Global</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Much better</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A bit better</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the same</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A bit worse</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Much worse</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(percentage of children giving each response. N=150)

Over two-thirds of the children were optimistic that life would be better, with them being marginally more optimistic about their own lives than the lives of others. Our analysis below now examines in more depth children’s responses to personal, local and global futures, and action for change.

a) Personal futures

Figures 2 and 3 show girls’ and boys’ responses to open ended questions asking them to talk about their personal hopes for the future.

Figure 2: Hopes for their personal futures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job aspirations</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material possessions</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambitions</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(percentage of children mentioning these hopes. N=150)

(NB As children could name up to three hopes or fears, the percentages in Figures 2 - 7 total more than 100%)

First of all, the sociability of the human person appears to be evident at 10 years of age, as the most commonly mentioned hope for the future focused on human relationships (56%): friendship, parenthood, the company of others (‘not being alone’, as one girl wrote). And within this category family relationships were mentioned most: forming a family and having children were seen as more important
than friendships, with one girl even mentioning “adopting children”. Whilst both girls and boys saw relationships as important there was a clear gender divide: girls appeared to prioritize relationships (69%) over job aspirations (44%), while the reverse was true for the boys who mentioned “being an inventor to improve the world” and “inventing a vaccine against cancer” as two aspirations.

The third most frequently expressed hope referred to material goods: having money, possessions, and entertainment. Whilst it would appear that more girls than boys aspired to material possessions (44% girls c.f. 26% boys), the many girls who aspired to owning a pet influenced this. No girl showed a desire to have a car or motorcycle, while the boys occasionally even indicated the brand they wished to own.

**Figure 3: Fears for their personal futures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Success and failure</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a victim</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ill health</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(percentage of children mentioning these fears. N=150)

Regarding their personal fears for the future, the main worry for these children centred on social and professional failure, and in particular, not being able to find employment in the future. Children appeared to be already concerned about having a source of income.

For girls, personal fears regarding relationships (80%) were their greatest concern, considerably more so than for boys (28%). This reflects their responses to earlier questions. Their most frequent worry was that a member of the family would die, whilst several girls noted concerns about not having children, a topic not mentioned by the boys who were more likely to worry “that my children wouldn’t love me” or about “betrayal”.

Boys had a greater fear about being a victim (37%) than girls (30%) while girls seemed to have more fears concerning their health (33%) than boys (22%). Girls’ fears included “dying young soon”, whilst boys’ concerns focused more on becoming ill.

**b) Local futures**

Figure 4 shows the response of the Spanish children when asked to state their three main hopes for the future of their locality.

The highest ranked hope was for conservation and improvement of the environment, where many specifically mentioned the elimination of pollution. While it was the area of greatest hope for both boys and girls, considerably more girls (72%) than boys (46%) considered that this was an issue. One girl was emphatic about the need for “clean water”.

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Girls were more likely to focus their hopes on improved community relations than the absence of crime and violence, while the reverse was true for the boys. Girls, for example, hoped to “be safe here” and “that people will not fight”. These children also hoped for the disappearance of poverty, which was expressed by a greater percentage of boys than girls.

Other hopes, such as improved health or facilities were only mentioned by a small proportion of the children, such as the girl who hoped “that people will be healthier” and the boys who wanted more sports events.

Their main fears for their locality were, for both boys and girls, an increase in violence and crime, with many references to war and terrorism. Boys mentioned “nuclear bombs” and “children getting lost” whilst girls mentioned “people dying” and “poor people being robbed”. The environment and community issues were also causes for concern. Girls were equally concerned about the environment (e.g more “rats” and more “drunks”) and community issues, whilst boys were more likely to mention the former.

When asked about the prospects for the overall future for the inhabitants of their city (Table 1), the children were nearly as optimistic as when asked about their own lives with the vast majority thinking things would improve. Only 13% thought that the future would be either a bit worse or much worse.

Responses to specific local issues: poverty, unemployment, violence, racism, health and the environment

The children were also questioned about a number of pre-selected issues. They were asked to indicate on a three point scale whether they felt each issue would be better, about the same or worse in the future in their local area.
Spanish children appear to be generally optimistic about the economic future for their local area. Nearly three quarters believed that there would be less poverty and just over half thought that there would be less unemployment in their city. Those who were positive about the future explained that “more things will be invented and more jobs will be created” and “many people will retire” thus creating more job opportunities.

However, one third thought the opposite: they worried that “stores will close down because there will be more huge stores like the Corte Inglés (a large department store)” and that “young people study less and less and don’t want to work, only to have fun”. One child argued that if the population increased then “more people lead to more poverty” whilst another thought poverty would increase because “lots of money is spent on video games, tobacco and beer”. From another perspective, one child’s concerns were that “Spain will become smaller and so there will be more poverty, since the Autonomous Communities want to separate”.

When asked whether their city would become more or less violent, children were once again optimistic: 51% of boys and 53% of girls stated that their city would be “less violent” and only 19% and 8%, respectively thought it would be “more violent”, with the rest thinking it would “stay the same”. One child explained:

Things will get better thanks to the fear of going to jail. They will learn their lesson. The children of those who have been arrested will learn not to be like their parents.

Of those who thought there would be more violence, one explained: “more immigration will lead to a more violent world with more crime” whilst another reasoned: “there aren’t any people who believe in God; that’s why there are more wars and worse people”.

In relation to both racism and prejudice the Spanish students were optimistic, with well over half of both girls and boys considering that in their city there would be “less prejudice and racism”. Children reasoned that “we will become accustomed to people who are different” and “racists will be put in prison”. On the other hand one in four thought there would be more racism, as “with more immigrants, racism will rise. People don’t like it because of disease and skin colour” and “young people judge without knowing”.

With regard to environmental problems, there appeared to be a wide variation in their response. 45% of boys and 50% of girls believed there would be fewer environmental problems, compared to one third who believed the opposite. On the positive side one boy thought that “motors will be invented that do not pollute” while another was optimistic that there would be “greater use of solar energy, since crude oil will run out”. Two children who were concerned about the environment explained: “Crude oil is getting more expensive, and people buy more of it. More trees will be cut down to make paper”.

The vast majority of both boys and girls (70%) thought that the people of their city would live a healthier life as “people are more aware of how bad junk food is” and “scientists will research formulas for curing diseases”. Those who were less optimistic cited “people smoking more” and “more drug addicts”.

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c) Global futures

Figure 6: Hopes for the future of the world

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace (absence of war)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime and Violence</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(percentage of children mentioning these hopes. N=150)

When we asked the children about the future of the planet, peace was at the heart of their hopes. It did not appear among hopes for the individual person or the local community, but was a major desire for the world at large. There were differences between boys and girls. Boys mentioned the desire for peace, or absence of war, most often, whereas for girls it came behind the desire for better relationships although obviously these are linked.

Three quarters of girls (and a third of boys) hoped for improved relationships between countries, wanting “more respect” and “more friendship”. They also mentioned better relationships between the sexes with one girl calling for “more equality between men and women”. On the other hand, one boy thought ‘fewer immigrants’ might solve some of the world’s problems, whilst another thought it would help if “everybody would believe in God”. Both boys and girls also wanted an end to world poverty, though it was more often mentioned by girls.

Other desires reflected those already mentioned for the local area, namely an improved environment and less crime and violence. One in four children cited hoped for an end to violence- this included references from girls to ‘no suicides’ and sexual abuse. Several girls indicated their interest in caring for animals, including preventing extinction of endangered species, but no boy mentioned this.

Figure 7: Fears for the future of the world

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>War</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural disasters</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community issues</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence and crime</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(percentage of children mentioning these fears. N=150)

The children’s fears for the future of the world mirrored their hopes and thus an increase in war or “arguments between countries” (boy) was by far the greatest cause for concern. Girls appeared especially worried about global poverty (41%) than boys, whilst a third of all children were concerned about natural disasters. Their concerns ranged from the “disappearance of the sun” (girl), the “end of the world”
(boy, girl), the appearance of a “new Ice Age” (boy), “no more rain” (boy), the “melting of the North Pole” (boy) and “people dying in the third world” (boy).

Girls mentioned concerns about crime and violence twice as much as boys, with fears that the “world will descend into chaos”. Both boys and girls worried about an “increase in the number of bad people” and one boy predicted a “deterioration of world development”. One girl’s fears were, simply, “that we forget our dreams”.

With regard to the **overall future of the people of the world** (Figure 1) our children were somewhat less optimistic than they were for their own future or the future of those in their community; although a large proportion still believed that the future for people around the world would be “better”.

**Responses to specific global issues: poverty, violence, racism, health and the environment**

As with the local area, children were asked to indicate on a three point scale whether they felt each of these key global issues would be better, about the same, or worse in the future, with follow-up interviews asking them to ‘say more’ about their thinking.

With regard to the alleviation of world **poverty**, both boys and girls responded optimistically: 66% of boys and 56% of girls believed that there would be “less poverty” in the world. The students were also optimistic when asked about the **lifestyle** of the world population: over two thirds affirmed that people would live a “healthier life”.

On the subject of **violence in the world**, however, there was less optimism. Whilst half were hopeful that there would be less violence, one third thought there would be more, with the rest thinking there would be no change. A similar case appeared when asked about the ending of **prejudice and racism** globally: 55% of girls and 42% of boys thought there would be less, but one quarter were concerned that there might be more.

There was again a clear division in opinion concerning **environmental problems**. The same number of boys (41%) believed that there would be “more environmental problems” as those who believed there would be fewer, with only 19% holding a middle-range opinion. Girls appeared to be slightly more optimistic with just over half thinking there would be “fewer environmental problems”.

**d) Education and action**

The final part of the study looked at children’s perceptions about their own role as active citizens and work done in schools.

**Figure 8: What can you do to make the world a better place?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A lot</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(percentage of children giving each response. N=150)

The majority of the students believed that they could contribute to making the world a better place, although this result is moderated by the fact that three quarters of them only believed they could contribute “a little”. It is noteworthy that there was
a small percentage who believed that they could not contribute “anything” to improve the world.

When asked about their involvement in any local or national organizations which deal with creating a better future, e.g. Friends of the Earth, Oxfam, Amnesty International, the majority of both boys and girls said they were not involved in any such action although some answered by referring to their parents: “Yes, my father belongs or we are members of... or we have sponsored...”

However, many children talked about what they did in their own lives to improve their city and the world. Most examples related to the environment where children talked about keeping the streets clean and using litter bins. A second course of action was supporting campaigns which often related to collecting food and money for the poor, (“donating money at Mass on Sunday”) or “giving blood to save lives”. A third category was making good relationships with others, such as “not fighting”, “spending time with people from other countries” and showing “respect for immigrants”. In this last category there is a notable gender difference as girls were twice as likely as boys to mention improving human relationships as an action which could improve the world. This prioritising by girls of welcoming and caring for people is also evident in responses elsewhere.

**Figure 9: How much have you learnt about global issues at school?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A lot</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(percentage of children giving each response. N=150)

When asked what they had learnt about global issues at school, more girls than boys thought they had learnt a lot, with very few children saying they had learnt nothing. There is no doubt that the children recognized the significance of learning about global issues at school with 88% of boys and 94% of girls seeing this area as “very important”. When asked to give examples of this learning, the responses were similar across the schools surveyed. The students participated in debates and discussions about items in the news concerning world development, cultural differences, women’s rights, natural catastrophes, global warming, immigration and the environment. They also looked at beliefs and values through discussions on world peace, family, poverty, racism and multiculturalism. Many students also said they participated in school activities such as:

- food collection campaigns: action against hunger, race against hunger, solidarity crèche;
- funding drives: for example, Domund;
- campaigns for the collection of toys, clothes and school materials for those less fortunate.

**Summary and discussion of implications for Spain**

Our study indicates that the principal concerns for over half of these 10-year-olds centre on their ability to be successful in life and find employment. Their hopes reflect their beliefs that human interaction, friendship, company and family relations are of great importance. The majority would like to have a family, while a third want
money and other material goods. Three quarters of the sample group believe that their personal life will be “better” than at present, compared to only 13% who believe it may be worse.

The study also demonstrates children’s concerns for the global future. They consider that the principal problems are war, natural disasters and poverty; although over two thirds think that the future for the people of the world will be “better”. Girls in particular hope that by improving relationships between countries, there will be peace. On the positive side, nearly half believe that environmental problems will diminish, with two thirds thinking that there will be less poverty and better health. However, one in four consider that there will be a rise in violence, and half think that racism will remain at the same levels or even rise.

The data show the importance of action in education, in formal or institutional areas, as well as in other non-formal areas, in order to address the concerns of these children and provide them with adequate guidance. It shows the need for children to be involved in action, and the importance of not focusing solely on the transmission of knowledge.

With regard to the importance of learning about such issues in primary and secondary education, it is interesting to see that it is viewed as very important by these children. A well-designed civic education programme can incorporate this. We believe that the following action needs to be taken as a result of this research:

i) ensuring that the content of what is taught, either specifically as citizenship education or during the teaching of other subjects, includes these local and global issues

ii) the attitudes and teaching methods of teachers needs to be incorporate pedagogy which encourages discussion and participation among their students

iii) the school ethos needs to mirror the principles of citizenship

iv) the students themselves must feel confident to contribute their opinions and concerns

In order to start teachers’ thinking about these four levels, we offer some initial areas for consideration:

- The implications of globalization for citizenship education
- The importance of the following areas, and coordination between them: school, family, society, communications media.
- E-ducation for e-democracy: the growing importance of information and communication technologies
- The European dimension of education: European citizenship
- Programmes of service-learning
- Parental education programmes specific to citizenship education

Such recommendations need to be seen in the context of the new law which indicates that citizenship education is a specific curricular area, and states:

*Its aim is to offer all students a space for reflection, analysis and study of the fundamental characteristics and working of a democratic regime, of the principles and rights established in the Constitution of Spain and in the treaties and the universal declarations of human rights, together with those values held in common which are the basis for democratic citizenship in a global context.*
This education, which can never be considered an alternative to or a substitute for religious education, does not contradict that democratic practice which should inspire the whole of school life and must be developed as part of the education of values with a cross-curricular character included in all school activities. This new subject will allow for in-depth research into some aspects of our life in common, and contribute to the formation of new citizens (LOE, 2006: preamble).

This, then, is the theory. The time has now come to put this theory into practice, which has led to much controversy and debate (cf. Jover and Naval, 2008 forthcoming). For example, the proposed objectives, skills, content and criteria for evaluation of the subject, especially in secondary education, has caused an outcry, particularly from organizations who see it as an attempt by the governing party to impose its secular worldview. Other people argue that the new framework allows for very little margin for choice in terms of how we view the basis of a pluralistic democratic system.

As with all curriculum innovation, the basic curricular framework will be influenced by various filters. The Autonomous Communities of Spain are now completing the curricular instructions for their respective territories. When this is done, the publishers will provide material for the classroom, and finally, each teacher will deliver their own interpretation to their pupils.

The data which we provide here can serve as a stimulus or point of departure for teachers as they consider their objectives for their students. Of particular relevance is the promotion of service-learning activities involving community action which can help children have a greater awareness of social justice issues and involvement in the environment in which they live.

The data also reveals the importance of the role of the family, though we discuss below the limitations of families with regard to helping children make sense of current local and global issues. In terms of personal and social development, we maintain that the family is the natural area where we learn to be a person, where we learn how to establish relationships with those who are close to us, and later to be open to other relationships with people who are more distant (cf. Myers-Walls and Somlai, 2001; Colomina, 2001; Beck-Gernsheim, 2003; Alonso and Román, 2003; Naval, 2005).

However, we cannot close our eyes to the reality of many families and the limitations of some relationships. What happens if the family cannot talk confidently with their child about personal, local or global issues? What if they avoid these topics? What if they are themselves prejudiced? Thus, when discussing the role of the family in the education of children, we must also consider the implications for educating parents. Any educational activity undertaken by a school will only be effective if it has the support of the parents, and this is especially the case with citizenship with its emphasis on values, community and current issues. Just as the school benefits from the education with which students arrive in the classroom, so too is there a duty to educate parents so that citizenship education is something which happens both at school and at home. Many parents welcome guidance in this area. This is especially true today, in our globalized society where the family finds itself under the influence of multiple social factors which often appear to divest parents of their ability to participate in the education of their children.
If school and family can work together with a single purpose, there is the opportunity to influence positively the education of children so that they grow as persons and as citizens, involved in society and responding to its needs and problems. We need to recognize family relations as the root of this confidence, whilst at the same time recognizing the numerous other important influences on the lives of children and the role that teachers can play.

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