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A Peep into Children's World

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Abstract

Empirical research studies on children and childhood from socio-cultural and ecological perspectives are in their nascent stages across the world, especially in India. The present research was aimed at understanding which/what living beings and objects children of ages 7–10 consider of utmost importance to them. Data were collected from a total of 346 children studying in two selected private-run and government-run schools in Delhi using a structured questionnaire presented in the form of a worksheet. A mixed methods approach was used to analyse the data using the process of thematic coding and subsequently applying descriptive statistics to find out prominent patterns, and ascertain the influence of gender and type of school on the responses of the children. The findings are presented in the sub-sections of—'most important living being' and 'most important thing or object'. The analysis indicates significant differences in the responses of children according to the type of school—government and private.

Socio-cultural and Ecological Perspectives of Understanding Children

Recent scholarly discourse in child studies has emphasised the understanding of childhood as a 'social construction' thereby implying that childhood is diverse and varied across cultures and societies. Through developmental psychology is rooted in the constructs of Piaget, Kohlberg and Erikson's theories have remained the predominant way of understanding children (Walkerdine, 2009). Recent scholarship from the fields of sociology and anthropology are challenging the notions of 'universal childhood'. Scholars such as Vygotsky (1978, 1986) have long-established the importance of social context in the broader understanding of children and cognition, yet it is only in the current century that there has been

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a focus on individual differences in childhood and the understanding of the development of children in terms of diversity (Balgopalan, 2008; Vasanta, 2004; Walderdine, 2009). There is now a growing recognition that the myth of universality of childhood needs to be deconstructed and understanding childhood as socially and historically constructed thereby situating children in a social and cultural context (Vasanta, 2004).

The conceptual frame of the present research is rooted in the social constructivist theories and the ecological framework. The theories of Lev Vygotsky and Urie Bronfenbrenner are seminal to facilitate this understanding.

Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory enables us to understand children and their development in a social context while cognising that child have an immense potential for learning. By proposing development as a 'zone' in which there are certain concepts and skills that are within the reach of the child albeit with some support from others (labelled zone of proximal development in the theory), Vygotsky's theory (1978) has revolutionised the understanding of children and their development. In the Vygotskian framework of learning (1986), social interaction with one's peers, parents, teachers and other members of the community is crucial in enabling the construction of knowledge by the children and cultural tools are of immense importance in this process of cognitive development. Vygotsky's constructs of 'spontaneous' and 'scientific concepts' (Vygotsky, 1986) provide useful pegs to situate cognition within an evolutionary frame and thereby understand the role of 'formal institutions of learning. While children acquire 'spontaneous concepts' in their direct interactions with the world, 'scientific concepts' are formulated in a formal context of learning.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1986) emphasises the environmental influences on children and provides us with a framework to facilitate understanding of children in the larger social context. In Bronfenbrenner's (1986, 1994) theory, the environment is envisioned as a series of nested structures that the child spends his/her life in. Depicting the systemic contexts as concentric circles, Bronfenbrenner (1986) positions them in a hierarchical manner—microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and cronosystem. All these systems influence each other and also influence the child. Beginning from the child's immediate surroundings the four systemic contexts encompass the influence of formal institutions such as school, media, cultural values, customs and laws amongst other factors. The theory stresses the bidirectionality of the interactions, and hence, again takes cognizance of the child as an active being.

Though there have been some attempts at researching children

from this perspective it is still in its nascent stages. Most research on children is focused on the nature of children's thinking and learning along with how children learn, often foregrounding it in the constructs of Piaget and Vygotsky. There have been a few pieces of research on intentions and desires (Schult, 2002) and children's aspirations (Auger, Blackhurst & Wahl, 2005) that highlight and establish the socio-cultural and familial influences on children and their thinking.

METHODOLOGY

The present research was aimed at finding out what children considered important in their lives in terms of people and objects, and analysing these responses in terms of the influence of gender and economic class (primarily ascertained through the school the children were going to).

The overall paradigm of the research is interpretive (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000: p. 22) which is characterised by the concern for the individual with the aim to understand the subjective world of human experience. This perceptive is especially crucial in an attempt to understand children and distinguish research on children as distinct from research on adults.

THE FIELD AND THE SAMPLE

Two schools in the same vicinity in South Delhi were selected to be a part of this research. These included—a state-run government school and a private autonomous school that primarily catered to families of middle-income groups. The children were in the age range of 7–9 years studying in Classes III and IV. The distribution of the sample is presented in table 1.

TOOL OF DATA COLLECTION

There is a lack of methods to study children's views and experiences pertaining to investigating their subjective experiences. Ways of researching children, especially in an interpretive frame are yet to gain impetus. After studying the few types of research that employ such methods (Punch, 2002) it was decided to use a worksheet as a tool of data collection for the present research. A structured

Table 1: Distribution of sample by gender and the school

	Private school	State-run school government	Total
Girls	92	79	171
Boys	80	95	175
Total	172	174	346

questionnaire was designed and presented as a worksheet to children to enable data collection from a large group of children. The worksheet was bilingual in nature (Hindi and English). Questions were simple and open-ended in nature mostly in the form of sentence completion.

METHODS OF ANALYSIS

The data collected were analysed using a mixed-method approach. Thematic analysis was the primary method of data analysis in which patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset were systematically identified and organised. The process followed for this included entry and tabulation of data in excel sheets, after which data obtained was sifted through, and preliminary coding was done leading to the emergence of certain thematic categories. Responses of each child were then categorised as per those categories and in that light, the categories were further refined. Subsequently, descriptive statistics were applied in which quantification of a number of responses in each category was done and percentages were calculated to find out the difference between responses of children by their gender and the school they were attending.

Ethics

Informed verbal consent was sought from the children regarding their participation in the research. The schools were informed of and given permission for the interaction of student-teachers with the children,

and the requisite permissions for that were taken from the administrative officials as required. All the protocols to protect the confidentially of responses and to ensure that no one was harmed in any way due to the research were duly followed.

Significance of research

The research is of immense significance since children's voices have remained muted through the studies on childhood as children have remained 'muted groups' (Hardman, 1973) and there is a dearth of research on children that ascertains their perceptions about the significance of the most important person and object in their lives. However, since the sample size of the study is small (N=346) and the sampling is not randomised, generalisations cannot be made based on this study.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The data is presented in the following themes—the most important living being in the children's lives and the most important object. The responses of the children are compared across the type of school they were going to (as a major indicator of their economic class) and gender.

The most important living being in the children's lives

The children were asked to specify the most important living being in their life and give a reason for the same. Table 2 depicts the responses of the children after coding and categorisation of the

Table 2: Most important living being in children's lives as represented in percentages

Most important living being	Percentage of private school children	Percentage of government school children
A person/persons in the child's family/friends	33.82	50.29
Animals	6.65	0.00
Plants	8.38	0.00
Misc. — Film actor, teacher, God	0.87	0.00
Total	49.71	50.29

responses segregated by the school they were going to.

The above table clearly indicates that for a majority of children (84%) a person in their family or a friend was the most important person in their lives, thus indicating the continuing importance of the micro system during the middle childhood stage. This category includes varied responses from children as indicated in Figure 1. Herein, the sub-category of 'both parents' is when the children stated either
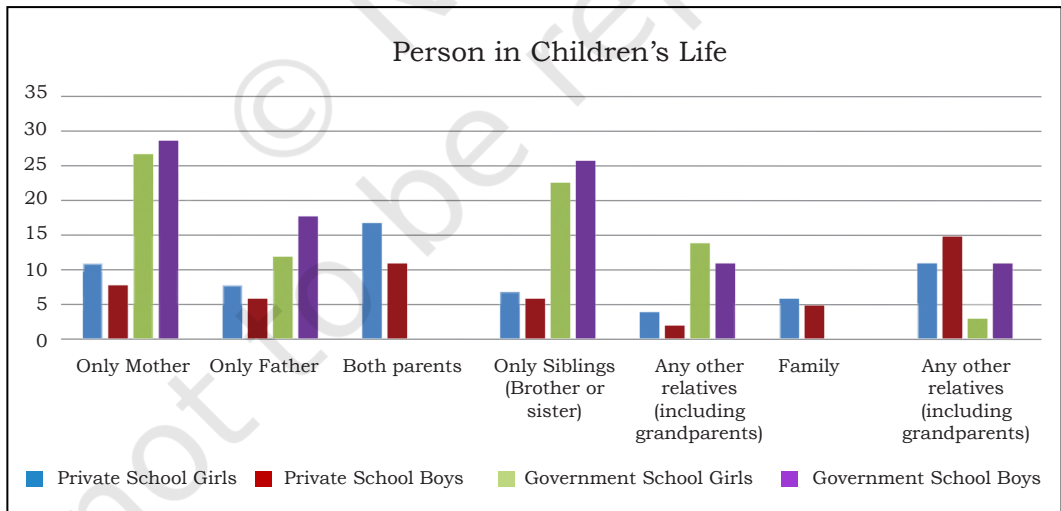
Figure 5.1: Most important person: Sub-categories

'parents' or 'mother and father' as their response.

As is evident from the Figure 5.1 there seems to be a difference in the responses of the government and private school children, with more children from government school specifying mother and siblings as the most important person in their lives; 'parents' and 'family' has been mentioned only by children going to private schools. Though there are not much difference in the number of responses of girls and boys in each category, the explanation for their choice was 'gendered'. While specifying the father as the most important person, the reasons given by the children of private school centred around — 'keep me safe', 'plays with me', 'gives me everything I want, while, responses given by children in the government school revolved around 'gives money' and 'things'. Reasons for the mother being the most important person was the same across both school as well as gender and revolved around 'care', 'love' and 'nurturing and rearing' with some children specifying cooking as well.

All the responses of government school children choosing a relation (mother, father, both parents, siblings and relatives) were around love and care. Only children going to private school chose 'both parents' and specified reasons such as 'they help in growth', 'help and guide me', 'love and play with me', 'help me do my homework'. A few children chose their friend as the most important living being and the reasons

specified were—'because she is a friend' or 'she is my best friend'.

While all the children going to the government school have specified only a person/person in their family or a friend; children attending private school have also specified 'animals', 'plants' or a 'film actor', 'teacher' and 'God' as a most important living being. This is an interesting finding and indicates the influence of schooling on children's responses. Responses such as 'plants are important since they give us oxygen/food/air' and 'without trees, human beings will die' indicate that the children are referring to the constructs taught at school and using the language of schooling discourse. This gains significance since the children's response is to an open-ended question on what is most significant in their lives. The majority of the children from a private school who specified animals were referring to their pet dog and the reason for their choice was — 'is cute' and 'plays with me'. Miscellaneous answers included—'teacher as she teaches us important things in life' and 'actor Tiger Shroff because I love his movies and he has six-pack abs'.

The responses of the children could be indicative of their family structure; for example, while a lot of government school children have mentioned siblings as the most important living being very few private school children have done so. Another pertinent finding is private school children's categorisation of 'parents' and 'family', which signifies the

development of their understanding of class inclusion.

MOST IMPORTANT OBJECT IN CHILDREN'S LIVES

The sentence completion of the most important object in the children's life generated a wide variety of responses as categorised in table 3.

It is evident from the above table that the majority of children in the government school (46%) specified a

Table 3: Most important thing/object in childen's lives

Most important living being		Private school children		Government school children		Total response
		Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	
Food (fruits, chocolate, ice-cream)		5	2	35	45	**87**
Toys and games		15	19	5	11	50
Gadgets	Mobile/iPad	7	11	0	2	20
	A.C	2	1	0	0	3
	T.V.	7	4	6	8	25
	Watch	0	2	0	0	2
Vehicle	Car	2	3	0	1	6
	Cycle	2	5	0	0	7
	Aeroplane	0	1	0	0	1
House		8	4	7	8	27
Nature (plants)		9	7	1	0	17
Animals (general and pets)		5	4	0	4	13
Family (including parents)		5	4	4	0	13
Friends		5	2	2	4	13
Accessories		4	0	6	2	12
Study		12	9	9	9	39
Water		0	2	0	1	3
Clothes		4	0	4	0	8
Total		92	80	79	95	346

particular food as the most important thing/object. A fruit (apple/grapes/mango) was stated most often because of its' taste. A vast variety of sweets such as *barfi, laddoo,* cake and other eatables such as pizza were also specified for the taste. This is an interesting finding since the children have internalised the value of food and might be projecting their desires in this question as well. The economic conditions of the children could be a prominent reason for this choice. Children's access to resources is also evident with a lot of private school children specifying various gadgets as the most important thing in their life.

There are gender differences in specification of 'toys and games' and 'mobile' as the most important thing in the children's lives with more boys than girls specifying it. This differentiation is explicit in their specification of the game with more boys stating—'car', 'supersonic', 'carrom board', 'dart gun' and girls mentioning 'doll', 'barbie', ' doremon teddy, 'home set'.

The importance of mobile was centred around playing games while T.V. was important since 'one could watch cartoons and films. A few children also said that their house was important for them primarily since it provides them shelter. Nature and animals were mentioned by more private school children than government school-going children. The reasons given by them for the same were quite different. While government school children focused upon the beauty of the plants as in the case of a girl who said that, for her rose is the most important object because 'it is beautiful to look at'; children of the private school gave reasons that were around the importance of plants and animals in the environment such as—'they supply us the air to breathe, 'are necessary for us to live. It is quite interesting to note that a few children have mentioned family and friends as the most important objects/thing. This could be indicative of the nature of the question being unclear to these children or the children being unable to segregate the importance of living things and objects in their minds.

Quite a few children also mentioned studies as being the most important object for them. This category also includes books as the response. The reasons given for these as being the most important were different across the schools the children were going to. The reasons given for specification of books and studies by private schools were — 'books help us in studies and gives us knowledge', 'school because we learn so much and become intelligent' while children going to government school reasoned—'studies because my parents trust me that I know more, so I have to study more', 'books so that I can study and get a good job'.

CONCLUSION

It is quite evident from the data analysis that there are differences in

both the responses of the children and the reasons specified for the same across the type of school the children were attending. Access by virtue of their economic background seemed to have influenced the choice of children. It can also be inferred that the responses of children about most important living beings and objects are also influenced by the processes of schooling. Gender differences are also evident in children's responses. Though girls and boys seem to have given similar responses in terms of their selection of most important living beings and objects, yet a deeper probing of the specification of choices as well as an explanation of the reasons for the choice highlights the gendered perspectives.

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