

School Education in 'Third World' Countries: Dream or Trauma?

Renate Nestvogel

*University of Essen
Department of Education*

Abstract

The author describes the contradictions children in the 'Third World' face with regard to school education. She first depicts childhood in the South and then analyzes the variety of school conditions that on the one hand exclude many children from educational institutions and on the other hand create considerable hardships to many of those enrolled. The article is based on numerous school visits in various countries of Africa, Asia and Middle America in the context of consultancy work for several German developing agencies. The presentation of concrete observations aims to make the human beings visible that all too often disappear behind the abstract facts and figures predominant in many reports on 'Third World' countries.

1 Introduction

"Of course, I would like to go to school, but how can I? Every morning, I have to help my mother with the preparation and selling of chapatis; I have to do that, because otherwise, we would not have enough to eat." This is the answer of a little girl in one of the crowded streets in Charsadda/Northern Pakistan, when I asked her why she did not attend school. And she said it with the fully conscience of the responsibility she assumes for her family at the age of 8 or 9 years.

I meet other girls not enrolled at school in the homes of elderly and well-respected women of Charsadda. Self-organized local education has a long tradition in the country and the government of Pakistan has included it in a non-formal reform project which is also promoted by the Pakistani women's movement. In those homes, the girls learn how to read and write as well as embroidery and needle work. The younger girls say that they cannot attend school because their parents do not have the money for the obligatory school

uniform and the books. Even though the State schools do not charge school fees, the children need money for basic school items and if they come to school without them, they are punished by the teacher or sent home. (The interviewed teachers, however, justify their behaviour by saying that they are only adhering to the rules established by the district school administration and that they would be reprimanded during school inspections if they didn't do it. I met only few teachers, and those were probably from better off families, who dared to ignore the official school regulations that would keep many children out of their schools). "I could not attend school regularly, because I had to take care of my little brothers and sisters in the absence of my parents", replied one of the older girls while working on her colourful and artful dowry. "School was too far away from our home, so that my parents were afraid to let me go there all by myself", said another girl. "My father would not give me the permission to attend school. I come here when he is not at home and without him knowing it", added a third one.

Some of the reasons why world wide more than 100 million children do not attend school or why school - in contrast to the situation of youth in industrialized countries - remains only a short episode in their lives, are given in the statements of the girls: poverty, child labour, high school fees and additional costs, family duties and a lack of schools.

In the following chapters I shall first describe some characteristics of what childhood means in 'Third World' countries and then analyze the variety and the contradictions of school conditions by means of examples selected from various countries that I visited in the late eighties and the beginning of the nineties. By choosing this procedure, I want to make visible the human beings often rendered invisible behind the statistics which dominate reports on Third World countries.

Because of a lack of more appropriate terms I will continue to use the term 'Third World', even though it has progressively become obsolete. The so-called non-allied countries of the South gave themselves that name at the conference of Bandung in 1955, in order to distinguish themselves from the 'First World' of the capitalist industrialized countries and the 'Second World' of the socialist countries. The latter no longer exist formally. In addition, the term comprises a large quantity of very heterogeneous countries like rich (especially oil producing) states, recently industrialized countries as well as countries, that for various reasons are very poor (see also Menzel 1992). These conditions also influence childhood and school education. An alternative term, "One World", suggests more proximity and responsibility, but conceals too strongly the unequal power structures that exist between the North and the South.

2 Childhood in 'Third World' Countries

Childhood in 'Third World' countries has many facets and for the majority of children differs from that in industrialized countries.

There is the minority of children mainly from the upper social classes, who grow up like little princes and princesses, surrounded by servants from the poorer segments of society. These servants are often commanded around, they are, as a sociologist from El Salvador termed it, cheaper than washing machines and accordingly treated with less care. These children often grow up in a world full of luxury, nourished by the sharp social differences within 'Third World' countries, and in a world of imported technology which is supposed to help them to a profession later on in their lives. Another minority of children of the upper and middle classes start kindergarten at the age of 3 or 4 in order to get prepared for a better start at school. They are supposed to get used to school discipline and to acquire knowledge relevant for school at the earliest age possible, as is the case in the Cameroons.

For most children in the South childhood is a period of quickly growing into little adults. At the age of 4, girls start to assume household tasks, take care of their little brothers and sisters, to replace their mother in the house when she is engaged in agricultural work or help her with field work, livestock and handicraft work. Little boys are sent on errands, have to look after the cattle or help merchants and craftsmen doing odd jobs. Depending on the cultural and socio-economic living conditions as well as gender specific work division, they are given jobs in the fields, in the production and processing of food, the making of tools, in the production of art objects or consumer goods, in the construction of houses or in retail and street commerce.

In many societies, including those of Europe, it was a custom to give children little tools, baskets etc. and tasks that would gradually make them accustomed to adults' work. What today is known as child labour or child exploitation can be regarded as a perversion of what formerly allowed children to participate in the world of adults according to their abilities. The ever increasing extreme forms of child labour and exploitation are linked to the spreading of poverty within the division of labour on a world wide scale. Monotonous carpet weaving or child prostitution are examples of how the industrialized world exploits the conditions of poverty for its own benefit.

But the mere perception of exploitative aspects would ignore the fact that children assume tasks that give them a feeling of self-respect and of responsibility for their family as well as their social environment, which have often been lost in industrialized countries. The film "El encuentro de

hombrecitos", produced by Peruvians, shows this in a very subtle and emphatic way. It portrays a little Peruvian and his friend who work as carriers in a market. This film stands in contrast to the many films that show street children or child workers as a menacing and miserly mass of "objects" (and not as conscious subjects) who imbue others with fear and repulsion or with a sort of pity that covers disdain. This film serves as excellent educational material because it can correct our images of children in 'Third World' countries and also because it shows the knowledge, skills and attitudes that can be acquired outside schools (without the exploitative aspects being ignored). In the series "children of this world", Gordian Troeller has produced other recommendable films that also offer realistic views on the topic.

3 Bright and Seamy Sides of Everyday School Life

The scenes that took place inside schools will now be described.

A "normal" village school in the environment of Peshawar/Pakistan: In the first class, about 100 children in school uniforms sit crowded on the mud floor of the class room, among them quite a few children who have not yet reached school age. It is a custom in many Pakistani regions to bring little brothers and sisters along to school. If the school does not have a pre-school class room, they sit beside their older brothers and sisters and "learn" together with them. The only furniture in the room is a table and a chair for the teacher. It is raining outside and the classroom is cold and sticky. The children shiver with cold, but they have learned how to sit still. The teacher reads from a book, and the children repeat what he says. In another school, the children no longer sit on the naked floor, but on wooden panels, a present from German developing aid. But they also suffer from the humidity of the soil. In many regions of the world, children have schools without roofs i.e. they learn in schools situated under a tree ("école sous l'arbre"; in Pakistan they are called shelterless schools), which can be found in many rural regions in Africa but also elsewhere and which are, under good weather conditions, quite bearable.

In the 7th grade, we no longer have the problem of an overcrowded classroom. Here only 5 girls sit at their desks and repeat what the teacher reads to them: "This is a book." - "This is a book." "It is on the table." "It is on the table." Afterwards they start reading full paragraphs from their books. But mostly they are not reading but reciting by heart - the only way to succeed in the final examinations at the end of each school year.

After several days of school visits, I have a bad cold, even though I neither sat on the floor nor had to sit still for even one lesson. I understand that health risks and school conditions that hardly allow any learning progress are further reasons why parents prefer to keep their children at home.

In another class the teacher, who, like many of the young women teachers had not received a proper teacher training, seems to be too shy to teach in the presence of our group (two Pakistani women and I). In that moment, a pupil jumps up, places herself in front of the class, recites by heart and with an impressive intonation a long text and then invites the other pupils to recite it in short passages. Girls who have learnt to replace their mothers are obviously also quite apt to replace their teachers.

Primary school teachers in Pakistan, like in many other countries of the world, have attended school for 10 years. About 25% start teaching immediately afterwards, and 75% have completed one year of teacher training with methods similar to those applied at school. Their salary is so low that they can hardly make a living of it but rather have to look for additional jobs. This explains why they have so little time for the preparation of lessons, for additional teacher training and even for the lessons.

At a state primary school in Meknes/Morocco, the French language is taught quickly and to a rhythm. The teacher hammers with a wooden stick on the desk of a pupil after every sentence - the signal for the pupil to repeat the sentence. The deafening noise of the hammer remained in my ears hours after the lesson. The school also had a very expressive female teacher who was like a living audio-visual aid. She used her body and her voice to create a learning atmosphere which kept the pupils at a high level of attention and cooperation. These abilities are also mastered by many teachers from East and West Africa. A teacher trainer from Zimbabwe whom we had invited to a conference to Germany said when being complimented on her expressive speech that such a use of gestures, mimic art and intonation is a normal part of her professional qualification.

In Abidjan/Ivory Coast we visited a secondary school of one of the Protestant churches which, on a vast territory, offered versatile training in agriculture. Farther north in the country another very impressive school offered courses in weaving, pottery, tailoring, and the school had a botanical garden with a nursery and beeping facilities. The students presented traditional dances and were accompanied by musicians who had also acquired their knowledge at that school. Creative attempts to link education with production can be found in many African countries, with different degrees of success. These activities depend on dedicated teachers, but also on considerable financial means, and

often they fail, because the pupils are already overburdened by the normal school requirements and refuse to engage in activities that are not relevant for the final exams.

The customary schools require a lot of hard learning and very prestigious schools excel in a high rate of passed examinations. One day, I asked the director of one of the best Protestant secondary schools in Bangangte/Cameroon about the reasons for his school being so successful. The pastor, very vivid and self-assertive, explains that it is based on three factors: qualified teachers (whom he wins over from government schools), additional lessons if necessary, and a strict discipline which can even include corporal punishment. The students did not make a suppressed or depressed impression despite strict regulations. As spirited as their director, they presented me with examples of their good knowledge of German, though they stressed that they did not intend to go to Germany. A German biology and chemistry teacher expressed her conviction that her students in Buea/Cameroon worked harder and would enter the final exams with more solid knowledge than German students. She added that the Cameroonians were also better with regard to concentration and discipline, so much that she did not need any technical aids in order to keep their attention.

When I remember all these events I become aware of the fact that my way of perceiving and evaluating is part of my German socialization and will certainly not suffice to adequately understand the situation in developing countries. According to my cultural patterns of interpretation, the results of the such schools should mainly be subordination and a strict respect for authorities, but this conclusion would probably be too simplistic considering the heterogeneity and the contradictions those countries face. One can conclude that replacing school drill by more creative educational methods and means is a luxury which the rich industrialized countries can afford, but which most 'Third World' countries do not dare or cannot afford to engage in.

4 The "Normal" Hurdle Race at Schools

While a child in Germany or in most other European countries can be fairly sure to be enrolled at school, remain in educational institutions until he or she has reached the age of 18 and passed the final examinations - perhaps repeating one or two classes - the educational career of the majority of children in 'Third World' countries is rather a constant hurdle race. The gap between the North and the South is reflected in almost every educational indicator, on every level of the educational system and in every classroom: If a child has the chance to

belong to the 50-100% of his age group who have access to school, his chances of dropping out soon after or before having finished the first grade are very high.

Language problems, in addition to poverty and unbearable school conditions, account for much of the early drop out rate. The multilingualism prevalent in many countries means that the mother tongue of a child is often not the language of instruction at school, resulting in the child's inability to follow the teacher. Pre-schools have the important function of making children acquainted with the national language (which is often the language of the former colonial powers) but only few parents can afford to pay the fees for it.

The reasons mentioned explain why more than 100 million of those children who had the chance to be enrolled in first grade, leave school before finishing primary school (usually after 5 years of schooling). This rigid selection continues year after year, continuing at the secondary school level. Repetition rates of 40% at each school level through graduation from high school and even at universities are, in a world wide context, not an exception, but rather the rule. Other reasons that play a certain role in the high drop out rates are; curricula that do not correspond to the living conditions and experiences of the pupils, but are rather oriented towards the standards and contents of industrialized countries, very few investments in teacher training and an insufficient supply of learning material. But there are also politically decided restrictions: the decision to make educational institutions very selective is an answer to the scarcity of further educational and especially employment opportunities and an instrument in the hands of the established elite who fear competition from these highly educated social groups.

The pressure caused by high selectivity corresponds to the performance pressure which the students experience often from first grade onwards. "Mami, you're ruining my life" complains a little Pakistani boy after several weeks at school; his mother had brought him there and hence it was her who had exposed him to this traumatic experience. The children of the upper social classes are not exempted from school drills, unless they are sent directly to boarding schools in Europe or the United States. On the other hand, their schools are better equipped and the teachers well trained; they often use other school books with superior material and exercises than children of the poorer classes, and additional learning materials are available to them, which the poor cannot afford. If all these means do not lead to achievement, they can improve their marks by coaching (which increases teachers' salaries) or by simply buying better marks from teachers or headmasters.

5 The Decay (or Disintegration) of the Educational System

In the last decades almost all 'Third World' countries have undertaken considerable efforts to expand their educational systems and to grant access to school to a growing number of children (Berstecher & Carr-Hill 1990; Nestvogel 1990). Since the mid-eighties, factors like falling prices on the world market, marketing difficulties, high debts, but also growing military expenditures as well as conditions set by the World Bank and IMF within the context of structural adjustment (a term that is known to almost every child in 'Third World' countries) have forced many countries to drastically reduce state expenditure in the social sectors, especially in the health service and the educational system. As a consequence, educational expansion and supplies stagnate and selective measures have been intensified.

On an average, 'Third World' countries spent less than U.S.\$1 in the beginning of the nineties per pupil and per year on learning material (in industrialized countries: U.S.\$100-200), and the time actually spent in primary schools was about half the time children in industrialized countries spent at school (Klausenitzer 1991).

In many countries the governments had set up public educational systems free of charge, like i.e. in frankophone countries (former French colonies), which after independence tried to maintain and expand formal education based on European models. In addition, there are schools maintained by churches which charge school fees and also have fairly good success rates. In many anglophone countries there is a system of private "public schools" which usually have higher standards than the private schools in frankophone countries.

Church schools in the Cameroons which had a good reputation because of their religious-ethical orientation were reduced in number in the past years. Many parents made considerable sacrifices in order to provide their children with a good education. But the fall in the prices for tropical products on the world market - like coffee, cocoa, tea and cotton - has either directly or indirectly affected the families because the state's revenues have decreased and civil servants can no longer be paid. When I asked a teacher in a Protestant professional school for girls why his class was so empty compared to the previous year, he said that the girls had been sent home to bring the school fees for the third trimester. But he already knew that most of the students would not come back. What he did not know was how he himself would be able to make ends meet in the future, because he had only received a small portion of his salary in the past months. A year later he wrote to me that he had planted pineapples in the family field in order to earn his living.

When parents were not able to pay the fees for private schools, they sent their children to state schools, resulting in some preliminary overcrowding. But in the meantime, even these schools have been hit by "the crisis".

In a public secondary school on the outskirts of Yaounde/Cameroon: the students sit in a spacious classroom furnished with desks and chairs, but the only books we can see are on the teacher's table. The teacher explains that he has not seen his salary for the past months and that apart from three old books he still owns, he has to devise his lessons from memory and from what he had learnt while in teacher training and even further back at school. He continued teaching because otherwise he would be dismissed and never be paid a salary, and also, because the students came and wanted to learn something. He said he would no longer visit the parents of his students as he did not have a salary and he felt embarrassed to do so, because the parents would feel an obligation to be hospitable and offer him a beer. Since they also suffered from unemployment, they would regard such a visit like begging. A university teacher who had started his service half a year ago and who had to teach in two teacher training centres which were 500 km apart from each other, had not yet seen any salary either. Another teacher received his first salary after 18 months work. When he asked about the salaries for the preceding months of service, he was told that he was welcome to quit his job if he had any complaints. Family ties undergo a hard challenge under such circumstances.

In El Salvador many public schools were not rebuilt after the earth quake and the long civil war or were only restored in such an inefficient manner that they were a danger to the lives of teachers and students. In both cases lessons take place irregularly or not at all. In Soweto/South Africa only one third of the students were able to be enrolled due to social and political unrest. In Togo, like in several other countries, all schools are closed until further notice because of the civil war.

In Kinshasa it was observed in the beginning of the eighties that many school girls would change their cloths from their school uniform to a dress right after class and sell their body in order to get a warm meal. In many African countries, if girls become pregnant they are no longer allowed to attend school. This is one reason why many girls quit school before passing the final examinations. This kind of unwanted pregnancy was unheard of in most regions of Africa before the introduction of school and the process of urbanization. In the villages of the old days, the children and youth were under the social control of elder people and usually received traditional instruction in sexual practices which has been forgotten today. This instruction has been declared immoral under the pressure of the church's influence; besides, adolescents are for the

greater part of the day on their own, busy with school and other activities, and the parents or other relatives no longer have the time and opportunity to teach it or no longer possess the proper knowledge. Parents in Muslim countries react to the dangers of schools by keeping their daughters at home as soon as they reach the age of puberty, when the social conditions are considered beyond their control or when school education is perceived as meaningless for the improvement of the living conditions prevalent in their local environment.

Regular school attendance is increasingly becoming a privilege of the rich. About 10% of the population, i.e. the upper classes, have organized their children's education separate from the education offered to the majority of children. At the same time they are those who, by their affiliation to the state apparatus, determine the educational destiny of the rest of the population.

Pupils', students' and teachers' reactions consist partly in submission but partly also in resistance to the described situation. Numerous pupils' and students' strikes as well as demonstrations of teachers unions bear testimony of a strong opposition against corrupt examination procedures, unjust selection devices, outdated curricula, exorbitant school and college fees, low teacher salaries and unacceptable working conditions. A number of those involved in the revolts have paid with their lives. Police and army soldiers shoot into demonstrating crowds. Dismissal from service or suspension from lessons are perhaps in this regard less severe forms of punishment, but are widely practiced by dictatorial regimes and are just as life threatening to the teachers.

6 Conclusion

Under the described circumstances, schools in 'Third World' countries have become a trauma for many children and adolescents as well as for their parents and teachers. At the same time school remains a dream linked to better living conditions - for shoe shine boys in Bolivia who proudly pay their own school fees from the little money they earn (Troeller), for the street children in Sri Lanka who insisted in naming the centre that was established for them a "school" (Jayaweera 1993), for the millions of children who are excluded and also for the pupils who, despite the heavy drillings they endure at school, still remain optimistic and think that the experience school provides them is worth the trouble.

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