



Universal Education Foundation

Education by All for the  
Well-Being of Children



## Executive Summary

# The Voice of Children

## Student Well-Being and the School Environment



Middle East Pilot  
Preliminary Survey Results:  
Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon

Fall 2007  
Ramallah, Palestine

Written by:

Marwan Awartani  
Cheryl Vince Whitman  
Jean Gordon



UEF is very grateful to Cisco Systems, Inc. for its generous contribution to the implementation of the surveys in Jordan and Lebanon.

Authorization to reproduce this document in whole or in part is granted. The citation should be: Universal Education Foundation. (Fall 2007). *The Voice of Children Component, Student Well-Being and the School Environment, Middle East Pilot. Preliminary Survey Results: Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine.* Ramallah, Palestine: Universal Education Foundation.

To order copies of this publication,

**write** to: Health and Human Development Programs  
Education Development Center, Inc.  
55 Chapel Street  
Newton, MA 02458-1060

or **call:** +1-617-618-2300  
or **fax:** +1-617-527-4096  
or **email:** [cvincewhitman@edc.org](mailto:cvincewhitman@edc.org)

This publication and other resources are available on the Internet at [www.uef-eba.org](http://www.uef-eba.org).

© 2007 Universal Education Foundation

## Preface

The vision of the Universal Education Foundation (UEF)\* is to achieve “Education by All for the Well-Being of Children.” UEF’s purpose is to inspire people to listen more to children and young people and to take more initiative for their well-being. UEF’s goals and hoped-for outcomes are as follows:

- The voices of boys and girls are increasingly and more effectively being heard, and boys and girls actively participate in shaping their learning environments.
- The well-being of children and young people is a central goal of the education and health systems in more and more countries.
- Information and communications technology and media contribute in unprecedented ways to reshaping the learning environment and promoting well-being among children.
- School systems are transformed in more and more countries to become more conducive to the well-being of children.

As a result, children and young people in more and more countries will experience improved well-being in their learning environments.

To achieve these goals, UEF has launched the *Voice of Children* component of its program, which uses both quantitative and qualitative research instruments to capture young people’s perceptions of the ways in which a given learning environment, in this case the school, affects their well-being. Using the results, UEF then engages young people in advocacy activities and dialogue with education planners and decision makers in order to effectively and systematically consider ways to reshape their learning environments to be more conducive to young people’s well-being.

The first major pilot of the *Voice of Children* for “Education by All for the Well-Being of Children” took place in Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine between April and June 2006. This report describes the process of instrument development and methods of administering the surveys to approximately 1,500 students ages 15–16 in each of the three countries, and it also presents the major findings.

Based on this experience, a team of professionals from different relevant disciplines was brought together by UEF in 2007 to undertake a revision of the first *Voice of Children* (VoC1) to refine the hypotheses and tools. The refined version, *Voice of Children 2* (VoC2), will be used in the “Education by All for the Well-Being of Children” initiative in Wales (U.K.) in 2008.

\* See **appendix A** for a list of abbreviations.

## Acknowledgments

The Universal Education Foundation acknowledges, with appreciation and gratitude, the valuable contribution of many individuals and organizations to the design, implementation and analysis of the three-country surveys. Special thanks go to the students, teachers and parents who participated in the focus group meetings that were organized in Palestine in the context of an extensive participatory process toward the development of the survey and indicators.

We wish also to acknowledge the generous contributions of our partners to the design of the instruments and to this report: the Ministries of Education in Jordan and Palestine, the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology in Jordan and Cisco Systems, Inc. Thanks also to our primary partners: Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC) and the European Institute of Education and Social Policy. Partner Organizations are listed in **figure 1**. See **appendix B** for a full list of people who contributed to the design of the *Voice of Children 1* survey and overall concept development of “Education by All for the Well-Being of Children.”

UEF is very grateful to Cisco Systems, Inc. for its generous contribution to the implementation of the surveys in Jordan and Lebanon.

The surveys were implemented by:

- Alpha International (Palestine)
- Center for Strategic Studies (Jordan)
- Statistics Lebanon Ltd. (Lebanon)

We thank the implementing organizations for their adherence to our data quality assurance protocols and for their timely implementation of the surveys.

## Executive Summary

### *Context and Background*

The Universal Education Foundation is a partnership initiative dedicated to creating a global movement toward “Education by All for the Well-Being of Children.” UEF’s vision, improving learning environments to nurture well-being, derives from several guiding principles. The first is that the education of children and young people does not happen merely within the school setting. Rather, learning and development take place in all aspects of a child’s and a young person’s life. Systems of education, health, information and communications technologies (ICT) and media, as well as society at large, need to foster the unique and holistic development of every girl and boy, while supporting their desire for joy in learning. Thus, the well-being of children and young people as well as their communities should be a central and shared goal of the education and health systems.

The UEF program has three major, interrelated components. *The Voice of Children (VoC)* uses a survey and qualitative methods to capture and share young people’s views on how various learning environments affect their well-being. *VoC* also brings young people to the table with policymakers in the role of change agents, using the data to advocate for reforms. The *Elham Inspirational* program identifies, celebrates and brings together inspiring initiatives, people and strategies that nurture well-being in selected learning environments in order to learn from each other. Finally, the *Universal Education Forums: Learning for Well-Being* are events that provide open spaces for mutual learning and multi-sectoral dialogue involving education, health, ICT and media. At each event, there will be a discussion of the challenges of and opportunities for transforming learning environments so they become more conducive to well-being.

Drawing on the World Health Organization’s (WHO) work, UEF’s current working definition of well-being is *the realization of one’s physical, emotional, social, mental and spiritual potential*. The *VoC* survey is designed to assess young people’s subjective perceptions of these aspects of well-being, as well as their views of the effect on their well-being of external factors in the school environment such as the curriculum, pedagogy, school psychosocial climate, health programs and services. A preliminary framework that relates subjective well-being to objective conditions in the school learning environment is presented in section II.

The focus of this report is to share the process of designing the *Voice of Children* component and the results of the first pilot undertaken in the Middle East.

In Palestine only, UEF conducted a dozen focus groups with approximately 100 boys and girls, ages 15–16, who also expressed their views through drawings. UEF chose this age group for the pilot because of their literacy skills. In Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine country-level social science research organizations administered the *VoC* survey to a representative sample of approximately 1,500 students in each country. Major trends and basic frequencies from the data are reported, along with gender differences. Highlights from the Palestinian qualitative data are used to elaborate some of the findings in this Executive Summary.

Additional work has since taken place to create *VoC2*, which will be administered in Wales in 2008. More work on the psychometric properties of the instrument will be done at that time and the well-being framework improved as UEF engages more countries in this exciting movement. New measures to assess the influence of ICT and media on well-being are in development. This report presents highlights of findings from *VoC1* in Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine. Some of the results are further illustrated by extracts from the qualitative survey undertaken in Palestine. No cross-country analyses are intended due to the unique conditions in each country.



**Youth involved in *Voice of Children* discuss the influence of the school learning environment on their well-being.**

## Major Findings

### *Overall Health Status and Well-Being*

1. In general, both boys and girls report high levels of satisfaction with their overall health status (95 percent or more in all three countries rated it as very good or good), as well as physical health and general appearance (roughly 95 percent said very satisfied or satisfied). The high levels of satisfaction are illustrated by the following quotes from the focus group discussions organized for the qualitative survey in Palestine. As one student said “They call me big ears, but I don’t care because I am satisfied with myself.” And another observed, “I was stuttering and children were making fun of me, but I am satisfied and everything is okay now.” However, given the importance of physical activity to well-being, it is important to note that approximately 40 percent of Palestinian and Jordanian students and 31 percent of Lebanese students report that they are dissatisfied with the sports activities in their school. In both Jordan and Palestine a higher percentage of girls than boys report that they are dissatisfied with school sports activities (roughly 50 percent versus 30 percent in both countries).
2. Only 14 to 27 percent of students chose the highest possible rating when asked if they were happy; in contrast, 47 to 53 percent chose the highest possible rating for their physical health. While many students report feeling *always* or *sometimes* happy—85 percent or more in all three countries—this leaves up to 15 percent of students reporting that they *rarely* or *never* feel happy. However, they do predominantly express feeling *always* or *sometimes* optimistic and hopeful, in control and able to deal with life’s challenges (more than 80 percent in all three countries).
3. When asked about their psychological condition, more than 50 percent of students report that they feel frustrated *always* or *sometimes*, with a higher percentage of girls than boys (on average, a difference of 6 percentage points) in all three countries reporting feelings of frustration *always* or *sometimes*. A large percentage of students in all three countries report feeling detached from their surroundings, either *always* or *sometimes*, ranging from 35 to 42 percent; 6–10 percent of students *always* feel detached from their surroundings.

### *Mental Ability and Academic Achievement*

4. In all three countries, at least 90 percent of students report feeling *very satisfied* or *satisfied* with their mental ability. Yet satisfaction with their academic achievement was notably lower, ranging from 67 to 75 percent in the categories of *very satisfied* and *satisfied*. In Palestine, for example, the focus groups revealed that this satisfaction with academic achievement can be affected by the rules and regulations of schools, the berating from teachers, the irrelevant nature of some curricula and rote methods for learning. One student said, “School has no role in developing our talents.” Another commented, “A lot of children are gifted, but school cannot discover them, despite the fact they spend 12 years there.”
5. Although most students (at least 80 percent) in all three countries report *very high* or *high* levels of comfort in expressing themselves through talking, this is less the case for girls than boys. In Palestine and Jordan, there is a difference of 5 and 8 percentage points, respectively. A Palestinian girl in one of the focus groups said, “Girls are not like boys. Boys can speak more freely inside school than girls, but girls will be viewed as impolite when they speak.” A significant percentage of youth do not feel comfortable using other modes of communication, such as writing, drawing, music and body language (29, 47, 49 and 64 percent on average, respectively). Between a third and nearly a half of students in the three countries report that they are dissatisfied with the cultural and art activities at school. In Palestine, a student shared, “My friend has a touching voice, but our music teacher refused to let her sing.” Another commented, “I wrote a poem and wanted to read it in front of the class, but my teacher refused and asked me to read it only to her.”



**Students express ideas and perspectives on well-being through drawings.**

### *School's Role in Teaching About and Motivating Healthy Lifestyles*

6. Student responses indicate that while roughly 86 percent of students in all three countries report that their schools successfully motivate them to take care of their personal hygiene, 40–60 percent of students report that they *disagree* or *strongly disagree* with the statement “my school educates me to adopt a healthy lifestyle.”
7. Slightly over 40 percent of students in all countries report that they either *always* or *sometimes* do not get along well with others. The mixed views on friendships at school are illustrated in the focus groups: the majority of the students expressed their love for school because it provides them with the chance to make new friends and meet old friends. Yet a contrasting view was, “We are not supposed to trust anybody in this day and age. We all make mistakes.”

### *Relationships with Teachers, Peers and Families*

8. Almost 40 percent of the students in Palestine report that only *a few* or *none* of their teachers provide good role models. This is the case for 30 percent in Jordan and 21 percent in Lebanon. On the other hand, half of the students in Jordan and Palestine and 70 percent in Lebanon think that *all* or *most* of their teachers love their jobs. The primary image students have of teachers is that of a coach (65 to 83 percentage), followed by parent (38 to 44 percentage) or friend (51 to 61 percent). A higher percentage of boys than girls in both Jordan and Palestine see their teacher as a friend (65 percent of boys versus roughly 42 percent of girls).
9. While students report *high* or *very high* levels of comfort when they talk with their teachers, between 20 and 30 percent said that only *some*, *a few* or *none* of their teachers treat them with respect. Students are split in their perceptions about whether their teachers care about them. In Palestine, for example, nearly a quarter report that *a few* or *none* of their teachers make them feel secure. A large proportion of students are afraid of being humiliated by their teachers (roughly 50 percent across all countries), and in all countries there is a higher percentage of girls than boys expressing this view with a difference of 14 and 10 percentage points in Palestine and Jordan, respectively.
10. In all the countries, over 90 percent of the students view their peers as friends (always or sometimes) and are satisfied with their relations with them, but express greater comfort in relationships with the same, rather than opposite, sex (94 percent compared with 50 to 85 percent). However, nearly a quarter in Jordan and Palestine and a fifth in Lebanon *rarely*



**Palestinian youth spend time with friends during recess.**

or *very rarely* see their classmates as trustworthy, though boys generally view their peers more favorably than girls. Almost two-thirds in Jordan and Palestine and just under a half in Lebanon view their classmates as competitors.

11. Relationships with their families are reported positively and students have the highest feelings of safety and security at home (94 percent on average) compared with in their neighborhood (83 percent on average) or in school (86 percent on average).
12. Thirty-eight percent of students in Palestine, 32 percent in Jordan and 8 percent in Lebanon report having experienced some form of physical abuse, such as being hit, slapped or pushed, during the current school year. A much higher percentage of boys than girls reported physical abuse with the percentage of boys being roughly three times that of girls. Of those who had been abused, students report that much of the abuse took place in the school, most commonly by teachers (40 to 62 percent) and school administrators (30 to 53 percent). In a focus group in Palestine, one student commented, “There is physical security at school, but sometimes the teacher hits a student on the head with no reason.” Another student said “Sometimes we are beaten for silly causes.”

13. Two thirds of students in Palestine, half in Jordan, and a quarter in Lebanon reported that they had been psychologically abused during the current school year by being yelled at, humiliated, isolated, threatened, or other means. Again, a higher percentage of boys than girls had been abused in this way, but the difference was much smaller (3 to 10 percentage points, depending on country) than in the case of physical abuse. Similar to trends reported in physical abuse, a large percentage of the abusers were reported to be teachers; in Jordan and Palestine, over 70 percent of those who had been abused had experienced this mistreatment at the hands of their teachers.
14. Nevertheless, 53 percent of students in Jordan, 48 percent in Palestine and 43 percent in Lebanon report *always* feeling a sense of belonging at school. Fewer in all the countries (between one-fifth and one-quarter) report *always* feeling happy and comfortable in school. Very high percentages report that they *always* feel self-confident (60 to 70 percent) and respected (roughly 60 percent) at school. Three-quarters rarely feel alienated or isolated (about three-quarters in the three countries). However, a good number of students (40 percent in Palestine, 33 percent in Jordan and 29 percent in Lebanon) are *always* or *sometimes* fearful of being mocked by their peers.

#### *Learning and Teaching Methods*

15. Satisfaction with their school's teaching methods was not particularly high (13 to 22 percent say only *a few* or *none*), nor was students' regard for teachers as role models (between 21 and 38 percent of students reporting only *a few* or *none*) or as being honest and sincere (13 to 22 percent say only *a few* or *none*). In Palestine, students shared that "One of my teachers can only teach through shouting" and "Teachers focus on clever students and forget the rest." Other students in the focus groups commented that classrooms are very overcrowded, which hinders student learning. "We have 56 students in class; if each wants to ask a question the period is over." When asked in the focus groups what they would do to improve the situation, some students said they would "increase the number of laboratories and equipment, the number of computers" while others said, "I would widen the classroom space, add classrooms, reconstruct playgrounds," and "I want to change unqualified teachers."
16. In both Lebanon and Palestine a higher percentage of girls than boys (a difference of 7 to 10 percentage points) report that they are not allowed to express their opinion freely at school. In all three countries were divided on how many of their teachers are accepting of new or unusual ideas.

In a number of areas, about a third of the students across the countries agreed strongly or reported high levels of satisfaction. These areas are that teachers support their curiosity, nurture their ability to think and desire to learn and encourage participation and questions. In Jordan and Palestine, roughly 40 percent report that *all* or *most* teachers follow a rote learning approach; twenty-eight percent report this in Lebanon. Nonetheless, almost half of students in Jordan and Palestine find their teachers' style of teaching to be fun, as do 53 percent in Lebanon.

17. In all countries, a significant number of students are dissatisfied (ranging from 25 to 40 percent) with student participation and engagement in the school community, and with their school's relationships with their parents and local community.
18. In all countries, family ranks as the source of greatest influence on students' ideas and beliefs and also for the environment that most influences their lifestyle when compared with television, the Internet and school. The Internet and television also play a major role in influencing students' beliefs, lifestyle and way of thinking in all countries, in some cases even more so than school.



**Students brainstorm the influences of ICT and media on youth well-being.**

## Conclusion

The piloting of *VoCI* in Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine has provided valuable information from young people about how they view their well-being—the physical, mental, social, emotional and spiritual dimensions—and whether or not they find school conducive to their well-being. This presentation of findings presents broad trends and descriptive information; more data analysis is required to examine the relationships among variables as well as to understand the psychometric properties of the survey.

At this stage in the analysis, some of these findings may appear contradictory, mostly in the areas of relationships with teachers and peers, but they may not be contradictory in the context of culture. For example, students report rather high levels of physical and verbal abuse from teachers, yet a high percentage also report that their teachers treat them with respect. Students may view such behavior from teachers as sanctioned by society, as it is sanctioned by parents. Therefore, students may see it as acceptable and not a sign of disrespect or not relevant to the notion of disrespect.

In peer relations, while a high percentage of students reports that they feel very satisfied with their relationships with friends, high percentages still do not trust their friends or see them as sources of support. Again, this may be another indication of how perceptions of interpersonal relationship are shaped and modified by context and culture. Friendships in the region have developed historically among families of the same clan; yet with growing urbanization, students are becoming classmates and friends with students from many different backgrounds.

In any case, the findings clearly suggest areas that schools or education systems may want to study further or act upon to make improvements that are more conducive to well-being. Those which stand out are as follows:

- Physical and verbal abuse by teachers and peers.
- The need for schools to do more to foster healthy lifestyles.
- Conditions of class size and the physical learning environment.
- Student dissatisfaction with the development of their mental ability and with the learning and teaching approaches (especially rote learning).
- Differences in class participation and treatment of female students.
- The growing influence of television and Internet on students' way of thinking.

In Palestine, for example, very exciting change is beginning to take place on the ground since *VoC1* was administered. The Universal Education Foundation has actively engaged young people with senior education and health leaders in Palestine, using the results to discuss and begin planning changes. In November 2006, Palestinian youth met with the UEF board, Palestinian government officials and representatives from media and ICT to share their stories, opinions and hopes about their school environment. In November 2007, UEF signed cooperative agreements to advance efforts with the Palestinian Ministry of Health, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency and the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education. Also in the fall of 2007, UEF played a significant role in the two-day international, scientific conference *The Welfare and the Well-being of the Palestinian Children*, held at Al-Quds University in Jerusalem.

Beyond this first pilot, the instrument has undergone significant revision and hypotheses have been developed. Wales is the next country poised to customize and use the survey for a similar purpose. Also in development is a comparable instrument to assess the influence of information and communications technologies and media on the well-being of children and young people.

It is UEF's hope that the *VoC* surveys will offer a unique contribution in providing a credible framework to examine the well-being of children and young people in different learning environments, instruments to assess the conduciveness of those learning environments to well-being, and advocacy strategies that place young people at the table with policy makers as agents of change. The involvement of young people themselves—their direct engagement—includes them as key players in UEF's overall movement of "Education by All for the Well-Being of Children."



## Executive Summary

# The Voice of Children

## Student Well-Being and the School Environment



Universal Education Foundation

Education by All for the  
Well-Being of Children



### Contact Information

Secretariat: P.O. Box 4605, Al-Bireh, Palestine  
Tel: + 972 2 296 79 67, Fax: + 972 2 298 46 86  
e-mail: [info@uef-eba.org](mailto:info@uef-eba.org) and [mawartani@uef-eba.org](mailto:mawartani@uef-eba.org)

Main Office: EIESP, c/o Université de Paris Dauphine,  
Place du Maréchal de Lattre de Tassigny, 75116 Paris, France  
Tel: + 33 1 4405 4007, Fax: + 33 1 4405 4002  
email: [jgordon@uef-eba.org](mailto:jgordon@uef-eba.org) and [dkropf@uef-eba.org](mailto:dkropf@uef-eba.org)

Program Development and Technical Support:  
Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC)  
55 Chapel Street, Newton, Massachusetts 02458, USA  
Tel: + 1 617-618-2300, Fax: + 1 617-527-4096  
email: [cvwhitman@uef-eba.org](mailto:cvwhitman@uef-eba.org) and [vguilfoy@uef-eba.org](mailto:vguilfoy@uef-eba.org)

website: [www.uef-eba.org](http://www.uef-eba.org)

