Our Common World: Two Voices

Amana Mirza, Age 12
Bamiyan, Afghanistan

Hong Yu Zhen, Age 12
Singapore

“One child, one teacher, one book, and one pen can change the world.”
That is the solution. That is the model answer. Do you question it?
With education, Don’t ask why. No
Opportunities for Exploring, trial and error
Growing. I am told what I should become:
I could be a doctor, a lawyer, a politician. King of the hill, top rat.

Am I invisible and voiceless to you?
My mother tells me, Hide your face, people are looking. Does it matter
I reply, I am also looking at them. Seeing what is unseen
Concealed women Struggling for a place
So little for so many. We are engulfed by the shadow of
Failure. Frustration. Never being good enough.
We are at war Fighting for the spotlight
For freedom I would give anything
To live, to learn. To stand out.

At twelve years old, I have sacrificed my childhood
Sold into marriage To the PSLE
Dragging bricks Burdened with expectations,
Parents saying Don’t let us down. Teachers saying Everyone else can do it
The walls close in. There is no time
I hunger and thirst For my true self
In this landscape of landmines There is no room for mistakes.
When the last grain has been devoured I surrender hobbies, sleep, weekends
The last temple finally obliterated Giving up is not an option.
Hope survives. But is it enough?

1 PSLE – Primary School Leaving Examination
You will need:

Two cups of flour, oil and yeast
Make bread
Basic ingredients
To enrich a life;

But while men starve for bread, I starve for knowledge:
Books to forge new frontiers,
Breaching boundaries, dismantling discrimination
Receptive hearts and open minds
Learning to change the future.
So simple yet
This war
To pull each child from the shadow
Whole.
The price is paid with bullets and blood.

Passionate and caring teachers
Never testing without first teaching.
Engaging lessons
Time to think, play and rest
An education that feeds the soul
So difficult, to fight
Against numbers, so challenging
To see a child separate from her grades
Loved.
In schools, generations hang in the balance.
In this poem, I want to express the contradiction between a girl in a first world country (like Singapore) and a girl from a third-world country (like Afghanistan). The two halves are meant to express their different views when you read them individually, as separate poems. Amana, living in a war-torn country, has to fight for her right to education. Going to school is a risk for her, as the Taliban will punish her and her family if they find out. In my mind, she is doubly discriminated against because she is Hazara, a minority group who live in Bamiyan. Her role model is Malala, an Afghan girl who was shot in the face by the Taliban for speaking up for girls’ rights to education. The line, “One pen, one teacher, one child and one book can change the world” is taken directly from her Nobel Peace Prize speech. To Amana, who is deprived of these things, the ingredients for education are basic needs. She imagines once these are provided for, everything will fall into place, and the world will be changed.

In contrast, Yu Zhen from Singapore, has every physical need provided for. Yet, her education has left her feeling disempowered. Amongst the sea of children who are shuffled through the system, she feels she is just a number, and the number on her tests is all that matters to everyone. In school, she constantly feels that she is not as good as others. She is forced to suppress her curiosity and just memorise answers in order succeed in the national exam (the PSLE).

When we read the two poems together, the combined poem makes the point that different people have different lists of ingredients, depending on their goals for education. Is education just about getting high test scores for personal success? My poem suggests that education should be about changing society for the better – reaching hearts and minds. Education should encourage open-mindedness, curiosity, the thoughtful questioning of social norms, and the challenging of discriminatory and prejudiced views. Education should also
nurture and care for the whole child. Only then will we have the right ingredients for our common future in education.