



THE QUEEN'S
COMMONWEALTH ESSAY COMPETITION 2018

Junior Winner: Janine Shum, Age 13, Singapore.

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.
With education,
Opportunities for
Growing.
I could be a doctor, a lawyer, a politician.

That is the model answer. Do you question it?
Don't ask why. No
Exploring, trial and error
I am told what I should become:
King of the hill, top rat.

Am I invisible and voiceless to you?

My mother tells me, *Hide your face, people are looking.*
I reply, *I am also looking at them.*
Concealed women
So little for so many.
Failure. Frustration.
We are at war
For freedom
To live, to learn.

Does it matter
Seeing what is unseen
Struggling for a place
We are engulfed by the shadow of
Never being good enough.
Fighting for the spotlight
I would give anything
To stand out.

At twelve years old, I have sacrificed my childhood

Sold into marriage
Dragging bricks
Parents saying *Don't let us down.*
The walls close in.
I hunger and thirst
In this landscape of landmines
When the last grain has been devoured
The last temple finally obliterated
Hope survives.

To the PSLE¹
Burdened with expectations,
Teachers saying *Everyone else can do it*
There is no time
For my true self
There is no room for mistakes.
I surrender hobbies, sleep, weekends
Giving up is not an option.
But is it enough?

¹ PSLE – Primary School Leaving Examination

You will need:

Two cups of flour, oil and yeast

Make bread

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.

Basic ingredients

To enrich a life;

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 to 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.