Opinion Article

Student and School Types, As Well As their Inter-actions, have an Impact on the Development of Intercultural Understanding

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INTRODUCTION

The article focuses on students' exposure to intercultural understanding in a number of educational settings. The effect of that exposure depends very much on the nature of the schools, the programmes they offer, and their location. It also depends on the 'nature' of the students and how that affects their interaction with the school and its cultural context both within and without. The variables are many, the lines of influence are complex, and the whole process is full of nuances. Typologies of schools and students are used in an attempt to overcome these difficulties and arrive at some conclusions, including the need for an improved nomenclature of school types, which may form the basis for testing through future empirical research.

EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In attempting to reorient teacher education to address sustainability, it is important to understand the role of intercultural understanding in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), and why it is important to promote understanding among cultures for ensuring a peaceful, just and sustainable world. However, the issue of intercultural understanding cannot be addressed in isolation, separately from other important concerns that affect societies. Humanity is facing multiple, complex problems that are interdependent at all levels: Local, national, regional and global. Every problem or issue has multiple interlinked dimensions that may be political, social, economic, technological, environmental or cultural, and cannot be solved simply from one perspective. With the advent of globalization, economic, political and technological considerations have mostly dominated, while socio-cultural and environmental implications have received a lower priority.

We are now experiencing the consequences of this imbalanced approach, in terms of environmental degradation and increasing social conflict, both within and beyond territorial borders, accompanied by economic turmoil due to greed and excess. The interrelated nature of global issues was acknowledged in UNESCO's Integrated Framework of Action for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy, declared by Ministers of Education in 1994, and more recently in the International Implementation Scheme for the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development for 2005-2014. ESD therefore promotes a holistic, trans- disciplinary and integrated, values-based approach to education, within the broader context of socio-cultural, economic and environmental factors and the socio- political issues of equity, poverty, democracy and quality of life. The International Implementation Scheme outlines three spheres of action and learning for sustainable development which are interconnected through culture as the underlying fourth

dimension, namely: Environment (i.e. natural);Society (including politics); and Economy The theme of intercultural understanding and respect for cultural diversity falls within the social dimension of peace, equality and human rights, underpinned by the cultural context, within and through which learning occurs, and which forms the basis for inter-linkages between the various sustainability dimensions (i.e., socio-political, environmental and economic). Within the International Implementation Scheme, the value of respect is seen as central to all aspects of sustainable development: Respect for self, for others and for all life on earth.

SOCIETY IMPACT

The social dimensions of ESD relate to the need for individuals and societies to live and work together peacefully, with justice, equity, care and respect for human dignity and rights. This requires people of diverse cultures to understand and respect each other, and to treat each other equitably and inclusively, whether within or between nations. Learners must try to understand how conflicts, colonization, political regimes, discrimination, globalization and power relationships have impacted on the human rights and circumstances of diverse cultures, faiths, and indigenous peoples. They need to become aware of current conflicts between cultures and faiths and those of the past, and learn conflict resolution skills for peace, reconciliation and forgiveness. In culturally diverse societies with a history of migration, or with pre-existing indigenous peoples or ethnic minorities, conflict resolution entails mutual understanding, non- discrimination, respect for difference, inclusion and equal opportunity, regardless of race, culture, gender, language or religious or political beliefs. It is difficult for a society without equity or justice to remain peaceful or socially cohesive.

Without peace or harmony, economic and environmental sustainability are also threatened. When human rights are not observed and injustices occur, peace and harmony are disturbed both within the community or nation, but also within the region and beyond. The only way that peace may be maintained both locally and globally is for human rights, justice and equity to prevail in all societies and across nations. The recognition of cultural difference and the right of all cultures to be expressed equally extend beyond the local or national context to global forms of communication and the media. Learners need to be aware of the processes of cultural homogenization due to globalization and Information and Communication Technology (ICT).If children do not see their culture reflected in the media, on the internet or in other forms of communication, it is difficult to maintain cultural pride, and it is easier to believe that the dominant culture is superior. Teachers must try to counter this in the classroom while also modelling respect for all cultures.

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