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Education and Justice, Solidarity, and International Peace

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By the beginning of the 21st century international peace seems to be more out of reach than ever. Though people world-wide are brought closer to each other, hostility between nations are growing. Inequality and injustice are increasing while powerful regimes are forcing their will upon other nations. International laws are put aside along with the supranational organisations that should monitor these laws.

Advanced technology has resulted in rapid changes that make former ways of living outdated and put new demands on education. In this context, the challenge is not to lose the identity of humanness in the midst of turmoil caused by the change and to connect highly developed information and civilisation with humanisation in the global world (KCES 2001).

Positive influence

Increased importance of education and demand for change, give policy makers and educators opportunity to influence a positive direction of new reforms and focus on development of the whole human being. According to the director of the PISA-studies, Andreas Schleicher, the knowledge society needs well-rounded citizens who are engaged with the world and who both can act autonomously and interact with diverse groups (Schleicher 2003). In the latest PISA-study the focus is on literacy, more specifically on reading literacy, which is recognised as “understanding, using and reflecting on written texts, in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential and to participate in society” (OECD 2003). Thus, strengthening students’ ability on reading literacy can support their personal development as well as their opportunity to take part in decision-making in society. The study showed wide inequalities within several countries, generally students from advantaged backgrounds perform better on average, though those who are more ‘engaged’ in and have positive attitudes to reading, are on average much better readers. The study confirmed that teachers’ support and expectations to each individual student is of major importance to their reading capability.

Citizen formation

While we are facing increased injustice with growing economic disparities that are reinforced by inequities in knowledge level and access to information technology, a trend in educational reforms is on the one hand to strengthen individual possibilities and choices, on the other to promote teamwork and responsibility. Modern life has become more individualised with weaker social cohesion and traditional bonds, which brings about a need for citizen formation. In a cross-country study on characteristics that will be of most importance if people are to cope with and manage their lives in the 21st century, experts from a variety of countries emphasised the following criteria:

- ability to look at and approach problems as a member of a global society
- ability to work with others in a cooperative way and to take responsibility for one's roles / duties within society
- ability to understand, accept and tolerate cultural differences
- capacity to think in a critical and systemic way
- willingness to resolve conflict in a non-violent manner
- willingness to change one's lifestyle and consumption habits to protect the environment
- ability to be sensitive towards and to defend human rights (e.g. rights of women, ethnic minorities, etc.)
- willingness and ability to participate in politics at local, national, and international levels.

Highly recommended educational strategies to promote such qualities are, according to the experts, supporting teaching of subject matter in a manner that encourages students to think critically and emphasise their abilities to critically assess information available (Cogan 1997). These recommendations may eventually push further democratisation of society.

Re-structuring curriculum

The changes in the socio-economic context caused by globalisation will inevitably lead to changes in education at all levels (STU 2001). At the school level, re-structuring in the curriculum has placed emphasis on problem-solving rather than rote-learning, developing higher-order thinking skills rather than encouraging information accumulation and cultivating creativity and divergent thinking rather than reinforcing mechanical replication (op.cit.).

High standards are required by the workforce. Through education students should be prepared for solving complex problems in a collaborative environment that is rapidly changing and make new demands on the workforce, and, equally important, students should be prepared to take care of themselves and share responsibility for their community.

Promoting a shift from students as passive recipients to active learners involves rethinking syllabus and teaching methods. Teachers have to carefully consider their interaction with the students and ask what the subject matter can and should signify to the student and how the student can experience this significance (Künzli 1998). In Wolfgang Klafki's theory on formation ('bildung') learning is conceptualised as a social process. A prerequisite for students' cognitive development is teachers' qualified decisions on what, why and how to teach. Through 'bildung' for all, students should develop the capacity for self-determination, participation and solidarity (Klafki 2000).

Control

The distinction between being a member of a competent workforce and citizen is blurred in a modern society. 'Education should provide learners with the capability to take charge of themselves and their lives, as well as the vigour and will to stand by others' (Norwegian Ministry of Education 1997). In the knowledge society human resources is of most importance. Emphasis is on individual possibilities and competition on the one hand, on the other on co-operation and social awareness. In order to achieve optimal results, we have an increasing number of tests and studies across countries. The PISA-study is one example of a study that aims in supporting policy makers in their planning. In the wake of extensive use of tests, international standards have followed and education has become a wealthy business with increasing exports of ideas, including mechanisms of control, from the industrialised world.

Values education

Though possibilities to enhance education are huge by comparative approaches, one should be fully aware of what may be perceived as success in one place doesn't necessarily work in another place. Moreover, growing attention is on students world-wide who do not find education meaningful and cause problems in their community. In contrast to intentions, education seems to have lost its true value for many people in different parts of the world. It is neither meaningful to the young people nor does it prepare them to be valuable participants in

their community. Professor Michael Mel (2001) has explained this well with examples from Papua New Guinea:

Our elders did not recognize skills and intelligence as the only means to becoming a meaningful member of the community. In other words education was not predisposed as matters of the hands and the head. Education was also about building character in a person. A person without character was like a building with no foundations, a tree without roots.....

In giving recognition to and realising the three complimentary components of education the process of education was really about character building.

Character related to ideas like humility, responsibility over actions, respect of authority, giving care of people and so on as much as growth of the intellect and skills. Focus only on two aspects of education will only contribute to a person who may appear knowledgeable and skilful but will lack the capacity – the wisdom- to live in, with and for their community.

If we want to make schools meaningful to the young people, we have to reconsider our education properly. It is neither fashionable programmes nor the number of computers in the school that make a difference, but how you combine old and new knowledge, how you transmit values of the past and teach young people to think with both head and heart.

With a borderless world, nation-states as entities will not disappear, but questions about national identity and values education will become more important (STU 2001). “In this age of information, I believe educators must realise the significance of wisdom as ‘know-why’ as well as knowledge as ‘know-how’. Knowledge is not merely a sum of information. And wisdom is more than a sum of knowledge. Wisdom, knowledge, and information should always go together, but the most value among these is wisdom. More so in the age of information, knowledge society” (Wan-Sang Han 2001). These were the words of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education and Human Resources Development when he opened the 11th World Congress of Comparative Education in Korea in 2001.

Reduced social cohesion

A main role of the school is to uphold traditions and transmit knowledge to the new generation to have continuity and stability. However, through schooling students should be

encouraged to critically evaluate societal norms and work against injustice and global trends that may lead the community in undesirable directions (Cogan 1997). Today, social institutions, including the family, which formerly supported education in socialising young people, are probably less effective. “In such circumstances it can be harder for education systems to induce social solidarity in the old ways – through promoting national identity and socialisation into relatively uniform sets of values and behavioural norms. And yet education systems are amongst the few social institutions left which can still potentially perform this role” (Green 2003, 1997).

It is a world-wide problem that the linkage between parents and the school is weakened; more so in countries as Palestine where the parents support for the school traditionally has been exceptionally strong and the severe situation has a strong negative effect on students’ outcome of schooling. Students need to feel that they are part of the local school community and that the learning activities are meaningful and relevant. During the years at school students should learn about their country, its history, geography and culture, and what it means to be a good member of society. Fragmented delineation of history will not appeal to the students, who should get a complete picture as possible to understand their own role. Of much importance is the teacher’s commitment and concern for each individual student.

Searching for successful schools, policy makers should rather look inside the country than importing ideas from abroad. Knowledge of local educational traditions should play a major role in reforms. This is imperative for local as well as foreign consultants. Mutual exchange of ideas and comparative approaches could enhance the quality of education and help us discern weaknesses in own education, but each country should see what benefits their education might gain from experiences of other countries and select the elements they could profit from. Generally, international consultants have to look deeper into the complexity of aid-activities and be more sensitive to local preferences. The result of lack of a complete development perspective is less concentration on the areas most in need and this may imply that necessary innovation is impeded. Quite often, donor agencies claim that their programmes have been a success by referring to good results and positive evaluations; generally they are less concerned whether their programmes are those that are *most* needed.

Globalisation may lead us to rethink old values and misuse of power. For better or worse young people do not accept the relative strength of different powers, some take part in issue-based movements, though it is a growing disenchantment from traditional political activity. Enhancing the quality of teaching and learning is the key to increase the awareness and commitment of the young to struggle against injustice and inequality.

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