



Educational Transformation With a New Global Urgency

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ABSTRACT

Education, never value-neutral, continues to be a most powerful force for shaping the next generation of global citizens and influencing the course of global development and inter-ethnic relations. Global interdependence requires that schooling can no longer serve local needs without a deeper understanding and careful consideration of global dimensions. The internationalization of education calls for a fundamental shift in the nature of teaching and learning, from “imparting the truth” to a liberal, but critical exploration and deconstruction of perspectives and their implications. An analysis of the anatomy of perspective contributes to the development of a cosmopolitan worldview which seeks to understand others with open-mindedness and mindfulness. At a more profound level, it shapes the educational enterprise in service of a universal common good.

Introduction: The Roles of an Education

Education has always been a much valued pathway to personal and societal success, now perhaps more so than ever. I do much of my work internationally, and a nearly universal truth¹ exists that education is valued. Parents, the world over, want the best for their offspring and, by and large, they trust in schools and in professionals to serve their educational needs. Children themselves have a natural curiosity about their world and competent educators, responding to this innate desire to learn, make schools into learning communities whose value is recognized, even taken for granted, by students, parents and society at large.

Education is also a profound socio-political instrument that allows the authorities, legitimate or not, to replicate, preserve and shape societal values. It isn't an ideological accident that the "battle of the hearts and minds" is fought in the educational arena, from schools for girls in Afghanistan, to Tiananmen Square, to the University of Tehran, and Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. No institution has, by law, such complete and prolonged access to impressionable minds at a young age as public education has. Education is never value-free. Through control over curriculum, policy development, assessment, and teacher education and certification, governments attempt to instil common societal values and guide the development of subsequent generations into a healthy, educated and productive work force. Education is meant to serve community.

Not least, education is an economic act, and increasingly the narrative about the value of education centres on employment at the expense of arguable greater and more important goals to which I will turn my attention later. Compulsory schooling has immediate economic benefits as it allows parents to be engaged in remunerative work, while their children are looked after. The connection between educational attainment and economic well-being are widely recognized and almost universal. Societies want "an educated workforce," and in some ways we are hovering between an industrial/service model which demands predictably uniform workers, compliantly "profit-generation ready," on the one hand, and a knowledge society that demands creativity, innovation, risk taking and entrepreneurship, on the other. This dichotomy is reflected in wanting the latest innovative *i*-tool, but a uniformly, dependable Tim Horton's breakfast, served in a mere minute. It also supports the growing divide between the have and have-nots, both locally and internationally. Our education system's limited ability to reconcile the demands of the diverse aspirations, abilities, and preferences of different groups and individuals makes it complicit to societal tensions that lead to increasingly dangerous class conflicts.

Our schools also screen youth for access to further educational opportunity on the basis of educational achievement and conformity. As the development of senior leadership for all sectors of our society generally takes place at university, this gate-keeping function and the teaching and assessment functions that support it, are educational but also profound political and cultural acts. Leaders, who during the next 25 years will need to solve such complex global problems as state terrorism and environmental degradation, are attending our local public schools now. What we teach them and how we teach them, matters. The all-important generation-shaping and leadership development functions of the public education system,² give rise to the perennial educational policy question, "*What values do we want to instil in our students; what do they need to know and be able to do, to prepare for their future?*"

Education and Community

Greater global interdependence makes it increasingly clear to many of us that events that happen elsewhere, impact all of us with a clarity and immediacy, that previously may have eluded us. For example, the impact of the 2008-2010 financial crisis was clearly felt around the world, leading to increased starvation in the most fragile areas of the globe, and drawing attention to the continuously increasing gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots”³ Unbridled pollution from our natural resources extraction, our industrial heartlands and our love of the automobile are causing havoc around the world, robbing the poorest of their farmlands, and washing away towns and villages. A one-week crash course in Yemen can inspire a young Nigerian to foil the world’s entire air transportation system,⁴ and overfishing of the coast of Somalia has reintroduced piracy, with a sophistication and scope that would make Captain Hook envious.

We are indeed one global village, one ecosystem, with integrated financial, information, communications, economic, transportation and security systems. Education must still serve students and our community, but how we understand the scope of community is rapidly changing. The closely intertwined needs of our local neighbourhood and the world community have created a new co-dependency, suggesting that education can no longer serve local needs without a deeper understanding and careful consideration of global dimensions. The local and the global are fusing, and this reality needs to inform our thinking about educational priorities and practices, teacher education, and, at a very fundamental level, what it means to be educated.

Much of my work is internationally focussed, and I am particularly interested in the role of education in starting, mitigating, resolving or perpetuating conflict, and in shaping the conditions for peaceful coexistence. My work in South Africa, Nigeria, the former Yugoslavia, and elsewhere confirms the power of teachers to help students think deeply through issues of inter-ethnic conflict and reconciliation. Alternatively, teachers can also encourage, sometimes in subtle ways, the pre-conditions for the repetitive cycle of violence that has plagued the Balkans, the Middle East, Afghanistan and other global “hot spots” for millennia. I have come to realize that teachers, more than any other professional group including politicians and the military, profoundly influence issues of war and peace.

I am engaged in education reform in Bhutan, a small Himalayan kingdom whose first democratic elections took place in 2008. The country has adapted a Gross

National Happiness (GHN) index to guide its holistic development and to measure progress, based on four pillars:

- Equitable and sustainable socioeconomic development
- Environmental conservation
- Preservation and promotion of culture
- Good governance (Ura & Galay, 2004)

Teacher education, curricula and classroom practices are being redefined and redesigned so that formal education supports a greater capacity for compassion and national well-being, only partially defined by economic factors. In a recent address to school principals, prime minister, Jigmi Y. Thinley (2009) called GNH the “National Consciousness,” and appealed to educators to help shape a common future based on compassion rather than greed.

We have much to learn from the challenges educators face in other contexts. They too are engaged in the noble work of “generation shaping” and leadership development. In their work, they too know that global issues are local issues, and our common, contemporary professional challenge lies in making connections between the local and the global in meaningful and constructive ways. How teachers around the world frame these issues, and help their students understand the complexities of a new global reality will profoundly influence our common future. The central premise of this paper is that an excessively locally focussed education no longer serves us well, and that an internationalization of educational content and practices is urgently required to prepare students for a global reality that is already upon us.

The Anatomy of Perspective

There is a need to help students develop a cosmopolitan worldview which seeks to understand other cultures, beliefs, other points of view with a genuine and respectful curiosity, indeed an *open-mindedness* and *mindfulness* that feeds lifelong learning and nurtures a sense of hope. Such development invites an analysis of the *anatomy of perspective*, starting with the realization that to others, our most deeply held views and values are also seen as another, and limited, perspective. I am not proposing a relativism that suggests that all points of view are of equal value or moral fortitude, but rather that perspectives offer, in the first instance, an opportunity for learning and critical reflection, rather than falsehoods or obstacles to be overcome so that we may impose our own views and achieve our own objectives.

This calls for a fundamental shift in the nature of teaching and learning, from “imparting the truth” to a liberal, but critical exploration and deconstruction of perspective. A study of history, culture, values, rhetoric, economics, politics, etcetera would inform our understanding of the developments of “points of view.” Curricula would embrace rather than replace perspectives from around the world, and develop a greater tolerance for ambiguity in students, commonly encouraging the suspension of judgment until different perspectives can be more fully explored. To understand truth as tentative, perhaps even elusive, would invite science teaching, for example, to continue to examine the physical world but also to explore the *limits* of science. Gender issues would no longer be examined as women’s issues, poverty as an issue of the poor, or racism as a black issue. An international social justice foundation would encourage much of our teaching and learning to move from what is to what could be and should be.

Internationalization of Education: Perception of Self in the Global Community

The intergenerational cycles of poverty that have plagued much of the world throughout history, including North America, increasingly give rise to violence. Improvements in global communications have made it clear that these are the result of structural imbalances that could largely be avoided. Marie Antoinette’s “let them eat cake” attitude, now prevalent on a global scale, will cost us our heads too. Empathy grows as we feel personally closer. Canada’s response to the recent disaster in Haiti was exemplary, in part, because a sizable Haitian community lives in Canada and our Governor General was born there; Haiti is part of an extended family of sorts.

The extension of community and the embrace of others as a means to educate ourselves is best articulated by Albert Einstein:

A human being is a part of a whole, called by us 'universe', a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest... a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. (In Calaprice, 2005, p. 206)

The internationalization of public education requires, in the first instance, a shift in perspectives and attitudes of education professionals and, by extension, a re-examination of teacher education. Teachers need to be encouraged to critically examine their own ethnocentric beliefs about teaching and learning (Norberg, 2000) and about what holds relevance in curriculum. They have to develop intercultural competencies and become “comfortable in the world,” to the extent that they can construct curriculum that comfortably incorporates international perspectives and guide students through the development of multiple perspectives (Leask, 2001, 2009). Such curricula seek to understand the basis for a number of pressing global issues, such as the growth of inter-ethnic and cross-cultural conflicts in light of “normative expectations; especially those linked to morally connotated concepts of religion, or fundamental values” (Wenderoth & VanBalkom, 2007, p. 43).

At a most basic level, the internationalization of curricula can draw on the world for case studies, information and examples. At a more profound level, it shapes the educational enterprise in service of a universal common good. This calls for an examination of our own cultural assumptions and Eurocentric values (Rivzi & Walsh, 1998). The internationalization of education requires a bold rethinking of educational content and practices, “to enable students to move between two or more world-views” (Bond, 2003, p. 5). “This transformative process of personal truth seeking, finding one’s way between dogma and ignorance, brain-washing and creativity, reproduction and innovation, invites a *critical* treatment of what is presented, by whom and for what purposes” (VanBalkom, 2010, p. 5). Hanson and Johnson (2009) remind us that “universities, as public entities, are values based organizations” that need “to attend to the personal ‘subjective states’” (p. 176). The kind of global citizenship education that is needed to help us negotiate this complex, personal-global space, and consider our emergent interdependent global community, anew, calls for a paradigmatic shift in public education, from an emphasis on “truth” and the dissemination of that certainty to an exploration of perspectives and an examination of their implications.

To develop the compassion for the entire human family, that Einstein made reference to, and that is central to a Buddhist philosophy, requires for children to get to know the world as *their* extended family. The internationalization of education is our best vehicle to accomplish this, locally, and supporting educational development for the most marginalized populations in the world, is our best chance to have our extended family welcome us. There is an urgency to do so. It used to be simple: if you wanted the best for your children, you made sure they received a good education. Today, if we want the best for our children, we better make sure that children elsewhere receive a good education too.

Notes

1. Girls' education, in particular, is not valued or allowed in some parts of the world, and constitutes a notable exception.
2. These are sometimes determined and directed through broad consultation and with the collaboration of professional groups, as is generally the case in Canada, and at other times and places, are simply decreed by the prevailing power elite.
3. This gap is evident internationally—between nations—as well as nationally. For example, in Canada, between 1998 and 2008, the highest paid 100 CEOs' average compensation outpaced inflation by 70%. Canadians earning the average income lost 6% to inflation over that period (Mackenzie, 2010, p. 5).
4. On December 25, 2009, twenty-three year old Nigerian Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab was overpowered by passengers on a Northwest Airlines flight from Amsterdam to Detroit, preventing the detonation of a bomb hidden in his underwear. He received his training and indoctrination in Yemen in the preceding 5 months.

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