Key Issues in UNESCO Policy on Inter-cultural Education

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Multiculturalism is a reality in most countries of the world in the 21st century. There are very few nation states where only one language is spoken, or only one set of cultural patterns or religious beliefs the norm. It is a fact that we live in an inter cultural world, interacting everyday of our lives with people who speak different languages from us, eat different foods, believe in different gods (or none at all), and who bring up their children in sometimes radically different ways. Nevertheless, most children, unless they are in culturally or religiously specific schools, interact on a daily basis with others who may hold different sets of values. Where this is recognized and positively supported, it may be considered formally as inter cultural education, where it is not, it nevertheless exists (albeit at an informal level) although in this case it is more likely that there will be negative stereotypes which circulate within the school and are reproduced through ignorance and fear of other cultures and religions.

Much has been made recently of approaches to multicultural education and intercultural education. In general terms, inter cultural education implies a proactive stance on the part of schools to bring different cultural groups together to a situation of understanding, respect and dialogue. Multicultural education often stops short of this goal, and seeks tolerance of other cultures rather than engagement and understanding. Multiculturalism as a policy may even encompass integrationist, and assimilation approaches while paying lip service to the notion of cultural diversity.

In terms of educational planning for multiculturalism, uniform solutions for educational policy are attractive in terms of administrative and managerial simplicity. Textbooks and

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learning materials produced in only one language and encompassing only national references to culture (leaving out the local languages or cultures) may seem more feasible and realistic. There is the position that through a ´one size fits all' education, cultural difference may be minimized, leading, the argument goes, to greater social cohesion. But both arguments disregard the risks involved in terms of reduced learning achievement[1], loss of cultural diversity and the promotion of learning to live together in one world as a precondition for peace. On the contrary, however the challenge must be for education systems to adapt to contemporary complex realities and provide a quality education which takes into consideration learners´ needs balancing these with social, cultural and political demands, and with economic development that, in turn, goes hand in hand with the eradication of poverty.

Culture and Education: The Crucial Relationship

Although education may be formal, informal or non formal, most of what we commonly refer to as education pertains to the formal schooling system taking place throughout the different learning cycles in young people's lives. School is hence the most visible educational institution, and its role is central to the transmission of knowledge and the development of competencies. It is a determinant factor in the evolution of societies and universal primary schooling is at the forefront of the Millennium Development Goals established by the United Nations to be achieved by 2015 [2] reflecting, in turn, the importance of the Dakar Plan of Action, which emerged from the World Forum on Education for All in 2000 and which set out six major goals including universal literacy, gender equity, quality education for all, universal primary schooling, early childhood education and education for life skills.[3]

Increasingly, however, there has been a call for the recognition of different cultural identities in education and in broader public policies in general. Indeed, the concept of multicultural citizenship, which supplements basic human rights with that of minority and cultural rights, has come to the

forefront in the work of the major development agencies, including the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme.[4] While cultural, religious and ethnic identities are not necessarily new in themselves, what is more recent is their role in demanding a say in national education policy thus expressing the need for their particular views of the world to be taken into consideration within the educational context.

In discussing culture in this text, reference is made to all the factors that pattern an individual's way of thinking, believing, feeling and acting towards other members of society. It has been defined variously in UNESCO documents as "the whole set of signs by which the members of a given society recognize …one another, while distinguishing them from people not belonging to that society"[5] and as "the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a society or social group….(encompassing) in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs" [6] Culture is at the core of identity and is a major component in the reconciliation of group identities within a framework of social cohesion. Language, moreover, is both the expression of a culture and the principal means through which culture reproduces itself. Linguistic diversity is a reflection often as not, although not exclusively, of cultural diversity. Both language and culture are at the core of education in different contexts and ergo of intercultural education.

In turn, culture and education are intertwined, language itself ensuring the transmission of knowledge in the school or learning context. Interculturality, on the other hand, refers to the relationships between cultures and, in this particular case, within the educational context. It presupposes cultural diversity in national settings and proposes dialogue between cultures with a view to promoting peaceful co-existence and tolerance of each other. A major challenge, nevertheless, when discussing the issue of education and culture is dealing with the inherent tension between diverse and competing world views, whether this be between groups that have recently migrated into territories previously occupied by other cultures and peoples, or between cultures and peoples that have long withstood the effects of

colonization from previous eras. Although the circumstances and conditions may be different, the underlying dialectics are nevertheless the same, namely the "toing" and "froing" between diverse knowledge systems and their relation, in turn, to the structures of power, both economic and political, within nation states. It is furthermore, this relationship of knowledge, power and political context that determines the nature of the educational system and the place it accords to diversity and multiculturalism.

UNESCO´s mandate

UNESCO, as the United Nations agency charged with monitoring and supporting the global trends in education, science, culture and communications, was mandated to support the development of "the means of communication between peoples and to employ these means for the purposes of mutual understanding and a truer and more perfect knowledge of each other´s lives"[7]. UNESCO was born with a post-War vision of utopian idealism, the key to peaceful relations between countries and peoples was, it was thought, the cultivation of knowledge and understanding. At that time, in the early forties, however, only 18 countries attended the first London Conference and only 44 came to the Constitutional Conference held in 1945. The world map still reflected the dominance of imperialism and it was only in the sixties with the achievement of independence by African states that the current configuration of UNESCO membership came into being and was able to develop its now considerable influence on the world debate on education, science, culture and communication and the interaction between these.

Cultural diversity

Stenou[8] has analysed the major UNESCO documents in regard to cultural diversity since its creation and has found that four main periods of thinking in the Organization´s history may be observed. In the first place, in the years following the end of the Second World War, UNESCO focused on education and knowledge as the key to peace. "The idea of pluralism, diversity

or interculturality was therefore linked to that of international, not intranational, differences…." Culture itself was seen less as a question of identity than as of artistic expression. The second period witnessed the independence of many formerly colonial countries which now entered the international arena and whose justification for coming into existence as nation states lay, precisely, in their separate cultural identities. During this period, a growing resistance to the homogenizing forces of technology began to be evident coupled with a largely silent resistance to the dominance of superpowers, in the Cold War context, by small states. The third period, she contends, constituted an extension of the second period whereby the notion of culture as political power became associated with the idea of endogenous development. The link between culture and development was associated with claims by developing countries to follow their own paths for development and to have the right to receive international funding for this. Finally, the fourth and most recent period has been characterized by a link between culture and democracy, with an emphasis on the need for tolerance and understanding not only between member states but also within them. We may add to her analysis that this has been associated with accelerated globalization and corresponding demographic shifts caused by, on the one hand, increasingly mobile migratory movements and on the other, sharp drops in the fertility levels of industrialized countries coupled with the opening up market economies occasioning influxes of young immigrant labour from different   cultural   backgrounds   into   ageing,   formerly monocultural and monolingual societies.

The most recent period in UNESCO´s work in regard to cultural diversity is marked by the watershed of the post 9/11 period. In particular, the General Conference of 2001 following shortly after the event itself, with all the debate and ramifications that ensued, unanimously approved the Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity seeing this as an opportunity to reaffirm the need for inter cultural dialogue and to avoid what Huntington had seen as the inevitable clash of civilizations [9]. The focus was now on the concept of constructive pluralism and the Organization´s Medium term Strategy for 2002 to 2007 explicitly states "the idea is to channel diversity towards constructive pluralism

through the creation of state and societal mechanisms to promote harmonious interaction between cultures. …the protection of cultural diversity is closely linked to the larger framework of the dialogue among civilizations and cultures and its ability to achieve genuine mutual understanding, solidarity and cooperation". (Stenou: 20).

The UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions approved in October, 2005 reinforced the ideas already expressed in the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity of 2001 in regard to the role of education in protecting cultural diversity, stating that diversity can only be guaranteed through respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and through educational programmes which sustain these.

Dialogue between Civilizations

The notion of dialogue between civilizations to neutralize or substitute for the supposed clash theory put forward by Huntington (op.cit) is now central to the thinking of UNESCO. The concept of "civilization" itself, moreover, is understood as "universal, plural and non- hierarchical… evolving through contact, exchange and dialogue…and is inherently inter cultural" [10]. There has indeed been a shift in the Organization´s thinking in regard to the notion of dialogue that has been documented in several texts.[11]

The movement for Dialogue among Civilizations has in turn motivated a considerable number of meetings and declarations which seek to move the agenda beyond merely stating the notion of goodwill between countries and cultures and towards seeking practical manifestations of that sense of community and tolerance. Hence, an International Ministerial Conference on the Dialogue among Civilizations was organized in India in 2003, a Regional Forum on Dialogue among Civilizations held in Macedonia in 2003, while in 2004, the Tirana regional Summit was convened on Inter religious and Inter ethnic Dialogue in South East Europe and finally in Hanoi in the same year, there was an Asia Pacific Conference on Dialogue among Cultures and Civilizations for Peace and Sustainable Development. Then in

2005 an International Conference on Fostering Dialogue among Cultures and Civilizations through Concrete and Sustainable Initiatives was held in Morocco whose aim was to be "a launch pad for the development and adoption of series of concrete measures and activities".

At the Rabat Conference education was identified as a prerequisite for dialogue and inter cultural understanding. "There is a repeated appeal from governments, politicians, parliamentarians, educators, decision-makers and civil society representatives to use education as a privileged tool for fostering the dialogue among cultures and civilizations".[12]

In particular, certain areas of education were singled out for emphasis to achieve this goal. Citizenship education, for example, whose aim is to teach young people their legal rights and obligations, and to promote their commitment to shared values, equity and justice, tolerance and respect for the Other. Multicultural education, itself, was conceived as enhancing and improving knowledge of culture, civilizations, religions and traditions through teachers' guides and curriculum models as well as the revision of national textbooks and university curricula in key disciplines such as history, geography, philosophy, social and human sciences. Particular emphasis was placed on the importance of textbook revision, for these: "present an opportunity for engaged dialogue between students, between teachers, and by extension between students and their families and ultimately between cultures".(ibid) The need for these to be examined from a gender and a human rights perspective so as to eliminate stereotypes and promote a positive view of other cultures was emphasized.

Much of the discourse surrounding the dialogue between civilizations has been intertwined with that of the prevention of terrorism, and indeed dialogue is perceived as an essential preventative measure to undermine the bases of hatred and misunderstanding that provoke terrorist activity. In particular in 2004 the Secretary General´s High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change made specific reference to the pivotal role of education.[13] Nevertheless we should be cautious about making assumptions in regard to the relationship, either in terms of promotion or prevention, between schooling and the

development of terrorism. Research carried out on this issue has not brought forward conclusive evidence that this is in fact the case, and it is evident that simplistic assumptions far from clarifying matters, often serve to confuse or create further intolerance or negative stereotyping. [14]

The Alliance of Civilizations (AoC)

In 2005, the Secretary General of the United Nations convened a High Level Group to examine ways and means to reduce world tensions and contribute to the fight against terrorism. One area which was marked out for attention was inevitably the schooling system and education in general, this being the principal institutional context where young people learn to relate to others in society and the world, and develop their personal and social identities. School is where they learn about their own history, and sometimes, the history of other countries and their society´s place in the world. In particular, the Group looked amongst other topics, at issues in global and cross cultural education, media literacy, teaching about religion, peace and civic education, higher education and teacher training and the role of the internet in education.

A major recommendation of the AoC has been the importance placed on the question of World History. The need has been stressed to develop curriculum and further disseminate those curriculums already available on World History, and to train teachers able to communicate to students the commonalities in the history of the world and the multiplicities and connections contained therein. The Report on education submitted to the High Level Group found that World History research and curriculum is not as advanced in Muslim regions of the world as in North America, the Far East and Latin America and that this lacuna should be addressed by the AoC in its work. Nevertheless, despite the fact world history studies are more developed in some regions, this does not of itself guarantee understanding and tolerance of other civilizations and their histories.[15] The Report also recommends further efforts in teaching about other religions in schools.

Education in multilingual contexts

Language and culture are, it is often posed, two sides of the same coin. Without language there is no culture, and language itself is the vehicle by which culture is communicated through collective memory and representation. Linguistic diversity is closely linked to cultural diversity and in many contexts also to biological diversity where loss of local languages often implies loss of local knowledge of the ecology.

Questions of identity, nationhood and power are closely linked to the use of specific languages in the classroom. In fact, the choice of language (or languages) of instruction is probably one of the most hotly debated aspects of inter cultural education occasioning widely divergent views on all sides of the spectrum. While there are strong educational arguments in favour of the use of mother tongue instruction a careful balance needs to be made between facilitating learning and providing access to broader learning contexts. Linguistic isolation from the rest of society is clearly a danger in minority language instruction, and policy makers need to be sensitive to the importance of bilingual models of instruction, and of avoiding the creation of museum cultures in ghettos on the margins of mainstream society.

In this regard, there are certain guiding principles which have been produced throughout the years of UNESCO´s mandate for action in the field of languages in education and have been the subject of numerous debates and declarations. They may be understood in terms of three key positions:

In the first place, UNESCO supports mother tongue instruction as a means of improving educational quality by building upon the knowledge and experience of the learners and the teachers. Secondly, UNESCO supports bilingual and/or multilingual education at all levels of education as a means of promoting both social and gender equality and as a key element of linguistically diverse societies. And finally, UNESCO supports language as an essential component of intercultural education in order to encourage understanding between different population groups and ensure respect for fundamental rights. [16]

Inter cultural education

UNESCO´s work on education in general, and Inter cultural education, in particular, is framed within a number of standard setting instruments and documents, the major one of which is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) which states categorically that

> *Education shall be directed to the full development of human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial and religious groups and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace*[17]

These principles are echoed in later standard setting documents, in particular the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960), the UNESCO Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Cooperation, Peace and Education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1974), The International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965), and the Declaration in the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981).

The 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights adds a central provision concerning the social empowerment of the individual through education by stating that "education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society"[18] while the 1989 Convention on Technical and Vocational Education explicitly states the need to take into consideration the cultural background of students and speaks of the importance of protecting the common heritage of mankind.[19] The (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child, one of the most influential conventions in this regard, states explicitly that "the education of the child shall be directed to….the development of respect for the child´s parents, his or her own cultural identity, languages and values, for the national values of the county in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or

her own."[20] Similarly,   the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and member of their Families (1990) emphasized that the teaching of the mother tongue and culture of the immigrants should be facilitated. More explicitly still, the ILO Convention 169 which addresses the needs of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples stipulates that "education programmes and services for the peoples concerned shall be developed and implemented….to address their special needs and shall   incorporate   their   histories,   their   knowledge   and technologies, their value systems and their social, economic and cultural aspirations..."[21] Specifically, in regard to inter cultural relations, it is required that "educational measures shall be taken among all sections of the national community…with the object of eliminating prejudices that they may harbour in respect of these peoples" (ref).[22]

Yet there is an underlying tension, though not necessarily a contradiction, between both the universality of the human right to education and the right to hold distinct identities as manifest in the phenomenon of cultural pluralism. Concepts of diversity, and indeed the reality of it, may inevitably create a need to accommodate different cultural and linguistic identities within a common national curriculum. The challenge is to be responsive to the expressed needs of specific societies. It may well be that different educational models emerge across regional, subregional and, indeed, local realities. While in some situations there may be expressed demand for an education that responds to and is inclusive of local cultural contexts, in others, this may be seen as marginalizing local communities from mainstream educational opportunities in the broader national context. Nevertheless, this need not be the case, and there are many successful examples of inter cultural education that reflect the contexts in which children are growing up.[23]

The Delors Commission on Education for the Twenty First Century established by UNESCO in 1993   to determine the emerging orientations of education policy in the world, set out four basic pillars of learning essential for the future of education. These were:[24]

-Learning to know
-Learning to do
-Learning to live together.
-Learning to be

Of these, the third pillar is arguably the most important in terms of inter cultural education and learning. By learning to live together children "develop an understanding of other people and an appreciation of interdependence-carrying out joint projects and learning to manage conflicts in a spirit of respect for the values of pluralism, mutual understanding …and peace".[25]

How may these pillars be translated into inter cultural education policy as understood by UNESCO? Throughout the past sixty years of its history UNESCO has served as a global forum for dialogue between member states, and as a reflector of trends and new thinking on social, scientific and educational issues. An analysis of documents and recommendations produced over this period has led to the establishment of certain key principles in regard to inter cultural education which may be summarized as

- respect for the cultural identity of the learner through provision of culturally appropriate and responsive quality education for all,
- provision of the cultural knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to participate fully and actively in society, and
- provision of the cultural knowledge, attitudes and skills which enable learners to contribute to respect, understanding and solidarity among individuals, ethnic, social, cultural and religious groups and nations.[26]

As events and international politics continue to shape world history, so too will the focus of UNESCO in terms of policy which reflects the needs and concerns of member states in a changing global context. Nevertheless, the Organization´s central mandate as originally set out in its Constitution to promote world peace through inter cultural dialogue remains as crucial as ever as we move forward through the 21st century.

Endnotes

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[1] Various studies have shown that children learn better when they learn in their mother tongue. See in this regard Tucker, G.R. 1997 *The Use of First and Second Languages in Education: A Review of Educational Experience*; Mehotra, S. 1998 *Education for All: Policy Lessons From High Achieving Countries;* UNICEF Staff Working Papers and Dutcher, N. 2001 Expanding Educational Opportunity in Linguistically Diverse Societies. Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington.

[2] The eight Millenium Development Goals include the achievement of universal primary education for boys and girls by 2015. See: www.un.org/millennium goals.

[3] See UNESCO 2000 World Report. *Education for All*.

[4] See for example, United Nations Development Program, Human Development Report 2004 *Cultural Liberty in Today´s Diverse World*. New York: UNDP; and the 2006 World Bank Report: *Cultural Diversity and Delivery of Services: A Major Challenge for Social Inclusion*

[5] UNESCO 1992 International Conference on Education 43rd session. The contribution of education to cultural development. P.5

[6] cf UNESCO 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity

[7] 1945 preamble Constitution UNESCO

[8] UNESCO 2004 ed K. Stenou. Unesco and the issue of cultural diversity. Review and strategy 1946 to 2004.

[9] Huntington, Samuel 1996 The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order. New York. Simon and Schuster

[10] UNESCO 2005 Report by the Director General on the Promotion of the Dialogue among Peoples. 171/EX.40

[11] See in particular UNESCO 2004 New Approaches and Concrete Actions in the Dialogue among Civilizations UNESCO 170 EX7INF 5 (Executive Board document).

[12] UNESCO, ISESCO,ALECSO, OIC, DCCO, Anna Lindh Foundation. 2005 Background Document : International Conference among Cultures and Civilizations through Concrete and Sustainable Initiatives. Rabat

[13] UN 2004 A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility. www.un.org/secureworld

[14] cf. Douglass´analysis for the High Level Group of the Alliance of Civilizations of research findings on this issue, particularly in studies in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, which failed to find any clear linkage.

[15] Indeed, recent polls in US cited by Douglass (op.cit.) suggest that is far from being the case, although a report published by the BBC (

BBC World Service 19.02.2007) comparing attitudes in 27 different countries found striking differences in attitudes even between European countries.

[16] See UNESCO 2003. Education in a Multilingual World**.** Ed. Linda King

[17] Art. 26.2 Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948.

[18] Art. 13, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. 1966

[19] Art 3 Convention on Technical and Vocational Education 1989

[20] Art 29 Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989

[21] Art 27. ILO Convention 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries. 1991

[22] ibid. Art.31

[23] See King,L. and S.Schielman 2004 *The Challenge of Indigenous Education.* UNESCO for a set of case studies on successful practice in indigenous and intercultural education in different regions of the world.

[24] Delors, Jacques 1996 *Learning: The Treasure within Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century* UNESCO

[25] ibid. page 97

[26] For further detail of these see Unesco 2006, Guidelines on Intercultural Education.

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