OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Promoting dialogue among civilizations

*Learning to appreciate diversity*

The current global situation requires a dialogue among civilizations, both to resolve existing conflicts – of ownership, of power and of worldview – and to help prevent future ones. Such a dialogue aims to increase mutual understanding and respect, not only among those with different political convictions, social positions and economic power, but also among people of different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds. Diversity is often perceived as a threat to one’s own individual or group identity, but better mutual understanding leads to a more tolerant and receptive attitude. At its best, inter-civilizational dialogue can result in a collective sense of shared goals, enabling us to address the most important issues of all: What kind of future world do we want to live in? How can we work together to solve the problems facing humankind today, and begin creating that future? This does not necessarily imply a common approach to every issue, but without such a constructive dialogue the future is less likely to become one that we would want.

*Dialogue is a process of transformation*

Inter-civilizational dialogue should be understood as an ongoing process in which the participants show not only a willingness to *exchange* information by sharing their own thoughts and listening to others, but also the openness to *transform* their own worldviews by integrating other perspectives into their ways of thinking. The
recognition of differences alone does not yet lead to mutual understanding; it is only through a genuine receptivity to other viewpoints that mutual appreciation occurs.

_Nurturing self-respect and respect for others_

The key element of a successful inter-civilizational dialogue is respect: respect for others as well as respect for oneself. It is often a combination of lack of self-respect and not being respected by others that leads to conflicts. Education, understood here as an ongoing process including both formal and informal modes of teaching and learning, plays a crucial role in nourishing such respect as well as an appreciation of diversity. In order to do this effectively, however, education should not attempt to convey one uniform understanding of the world. Ways of understanding are embedded in the context of particular cultural groups, which is why different civilizations have different perspectives on the world. Education should also help us to appreciate the fact that, even as there is usually more than one perspective on any given problem, so there is usually more than one way of addressing that problem.

_Diversified curricula_

In concrete terms, to contribute effectively to a dialogue of civilizations, education should:

- Take into account not only what elites and the industrialized world as a whole can _teach_ to non-elites and developing countries, but also – and equally importantly – what dominant groups can _learn_ from those who have been marginalized.
- Give room in school curricula to knowledge, skills and models of analysis rooted in local cultures. Merely to teach “Western” scientific approaches, belief and value systems not only ignores the existence and validity of other worldviews, but may harm the ethnic, cultural and national pride of local people by creating or reinforcing a negative image of themselves.

A concrete example for such a two-way understanding of education is the “Andean Project on Peasant Technologies” in Peru (“Proyecto Andino de Tecnologías Campesinas”, PRATEC), which is devoted to the affirmation of Andean culture. Based on the conviction that the indigenous knowledge of the Andean peasants, which has enabled them to be self-reliant for many centuries, should be taught at schools and universities in Peru, PRATEC aims to “de-colonize” the agricultural education curriculum, which in its current form reflects only non-indigenous scientific approaches. In this way, PRATEC aims to “regenerate” traditional Andean peasant culture by helping the Andean people recover respect for their own history and traditions.
• Nurture self-respect, including pride in one’s cultural, ethnic, national or other group identity, without basing that self-respect on value judgments about other cultures, ethnic groups or nations. Only in this way can nation-building develop with the attitude of mutual respect necessary to engage in dialogue.

2. History of inter-civilizational dialogues

*Inter-civilizational encounters are crucial for human and ecological well-being*

Inter-civilizational dialogue is not a new phenomenon. History illustrates the fluidity of civilizations, whose own transformations have usually been linked to their encounter with other civilizations. Many of these interactions have been crucial for self-development; for example, the mutual influence between the ancient Greek and Roman cultures. Some civilizations have been so profoundly affected that it seems more accurate to describe the encounter as an interpenetration or merger; for example, the European West developed from such an interaction between Greco-Roman civilization and Judeo-Christian culture.

Encounters between civilizations have often been stressful, but they have also been a stimulus to creativity. Realizing that other cultures do some things differently can be threatening, yet it can also be liberating. This implies that dialogue among civilizations is not only possible but may even be essential for identifying problems and discovering solutions to the common challenges now facing us. To foster the most meaningful dialogue, education should emphasize the different achievements of different civilizations, and how civilizations have benefited from each other, rather than focusing on the history of political power relationships. Today we realize that the achievements of all civilizations form the collective heritage of all humankind. That encourages us to learn from our common past, and to become more open to future dialogue that will develop new paradigms and creative responses.

*Encounters among unequal partners and the desire for immediate gains*

There are many historical examples of encounters ending in conflict. In these cases, encounters have not been between equals, but have been initiated by one side for their own benefit, usually at some cost to the other. Often, the starting point for past inter-civilizational encounters has been trade, where the motivation to expose oneself to
another culture or civilization lay in the expectation of some immediate economic gain. The legacy of colonialism and neo-colonialism reminds us that the desire to expand territorial, economic or political influence has also been an important impetus for inter-civilizational encounters. Religious encounters, too, have sometimes been characterized by the desire to expand by force rather than by means of persuasion.

**Teaching the desire for dialogue**

The poorer, less educated, disempowered or otherwise marginalized groups within societies – on local, regional, national and international levels – often have more incentive to participate in a dialogue than do the wealthy and powerful, who have the means to pursue their interests without first securing the understanding of others. For a genuine dialogue among civilizations, however, it will be crucial to develop the interest and desire to engage in exchanges on an equal basis, and without the expectation of immediate profits. That partners to the dialogue come from different ethnic, social or cultural backgrounds is a challenge, but also an advantage insofar as we are interested in different perspectives. Education should therefore strive to teach the necessity for dialogue not only to those without easy access to other means of pursuing their interests, but to elites and non-elites alike.

The history of inter-civilizational dialogues reminds us, however, that all such discussions take place within the context of specific power relations – political, economic, and technological – which tend to distort that dialogue. In order for dialogue to be successful, therefore, that social context must be acknowledged, perhaps by making it one of the topics for discussion.

To help people of all backgrounds appreciate the joys and advantages – not necessarily material – of learning about other civilizations and interacting with other cultures, it is necessary not only to disseminate information on the worldwide effects of globalization, but also to:

- inquire into many traditions for creative wisdom and insights to help solve the common crises confronting humanity; and
- publicly discuss, evaluate and creatively test and improve these solutions, making good use of the many opportunities for public information and discussion offered by old and new media technologies.
3. **Multi-cultural society and cultural transformation**

*Multiple levels of dialogue*

Experiences in societies that comprise members of different ethnic groups show that conflicts often are not rooted in ethnic or cultural differences, but are a product of socio-economic factors. In order to help prevent and solve such conflicts, therefore, education should empower and motivate people to engage in dialogue along various paths:

- among elites or their organizations within a region, a country, or on the international level;
- among local people, or grass-roots movements, on the local, national, or international level (e.g. local people interacting with other local people of a different ethnicity and religion, NGOs interacting with foreign peasants or fishermen, helping them preserve their traditional farming or fishing techniques, etc.);
- between local people or grassroots movements and elites, both within one culture and between different cultures (e.g. laborers or NGOs addressing elites of their own or other cultures about exploitative policies).

*Learning to perceive each other as equal subjects*

Education has a decisive role to play in fostering harmonious co-existence within and between multi-cultural societies, by building on the special opportunities they provide for unmediated exposure to different ways of thinking and acting. Such direct exposure can be employed to avoid the usual subject-object dichotomy characteristic of “cognition,” nourishing instead the skill for “re-cognition,” which stimulates people to perceive each other as equal subjects taking part in a mutual communication process.

*Multi-cultural curricula*

The goal of multi-cultural education should be to encourage a greater openness towards other cultures, not the promotion of a singular interpretation of the world. To be able to interact with members of different cultures on an equal footing it is essential that, beginning at an early age, children learn to distinguish and appreciate different worldviews. School curricula should therefore make room at all levels for teaching about different values, views and approaches. To do this, curricula should themselves be the products of a dialogue between representatives of the different parts of a society.
Teaching skills, not just knowledge

Multi-cultural education should go beyond the transmission of factual knowledge quantifiably measured in exams. In order to prepare young people to live in a globalizing world, education should focus on developing skills:

- basic literary, language and interaction skills;
- skills to gather and analyze information;
- skills to determine how one’s actions effect other people and ecosystems;
- skills to recognize and appreciate both the similarities and the differences in other cultures, and to analyze how other viewpoints or ways of living can contribute to solving conflicts, inequities, and other global problems.

Important resources for intercultural and multicultural education the American Association for Asian Studies periodical series entitled “Education about Asia”. It introduces a wealth of highly rated English-language lesson plans and curricular materials to improve understanding of countries and cultures in Asia among children in European and American countries.

4. Perspectives from Asia

Need for dialogue between religions

Asia covers a vast area and is highly diverse in terms of history, ethnicity, language and culture. The original home of most of the world’s major religions, Asia comprises numerous societies that are not only multi-cultural but also multi-religious. Experiences from Asia show that religion has often been invoked for political rather than spiritual reasons, especially in times of political and economic crises. This has seriously hindered inter-civilizational dialogue, and illustrates the need to actively promote dialogue between followers of different religions. Such inter-religious dialogue should be based on the recognition of religious diversity, and it should aim to create respect and tolerance among religions by exploring their similarities as well as their differences.

Intra- and inter-religious dialogue

The practice of blaming members of other religions for problems stemming from non-religious causes is usually the result of an emotional attachment to one’s own religion, rather than a profound understanding of it. To deepen understanding and to encourage respect and tolerance among different religions, it is necessary to encourage
people to openly communicate about religion on the intra-communal level – that is, within their own religious communities – as well as on the inter-communal level, between people from different religious backgrounds.

The role of education in inter-religious dialogue
Considering the ease with which religion has been abused as an instrument to further political goals, religious and political leaders have an important role to play in creating an atmosphere of interest in different religions, which is necessary to encourage people to participate in inter-religious dialogues. Education is crucial for creating, from an early age on, a platform for inter-religious encounters, as well as for formulating the premises and paradigms for such dialogue.

In Malaysia, for example, offering comparative religion classes in schools and universities has proven to be an effective way to foster inter-religious tolerance. In schools, knowledge about religions and cultures is conveyed by directly teaching about them, or by referring to other religions and cultures in materials designed for the improvement of reading skills. At the tertiary levels, universities and institutions are increasingly offering degree courses in comparative religion. Personal encounters with members of different religions, videos and visits to various houses of worship are part of the course work.

Diversifying educational principles
To create a more peaceful and humane society in which dialogue is the norm and not the exception, it is essential that people value and respect themselves and others, not for what they have, but for what they can do to contribute to society. Educational principles found in Asia may help to strengthen such frameworks of identity and recognition. In many Asian societies, education emphasizes self-discipline, perseverance, sacrifice and restraint, rather than individualism and the regular assertion of individual rights. These qualities can contribute to a greater awareness of the consequences of individual actions and lifestyles for other people, as well as for the global environment. They could therefore inform curricula development in other parts of the world as well, along with the human qualities and values appreciated elsewhere.

Historical examples from Asia also show that much can be learned from non-modern societies about economies and ways of life which are more sustainable than the consumerist lifestyle presently dominant in developed societies. This reinforces the necessity that education at all levels should make frequent reference to different worldviews and values, including those prevalent in non-modern societies.
Universality versus Particularity?

Creating a balance between otherness and commonness
Universality and particularity are not mutually exclusive, but need to be balanced. One of the ironies of studying different cultures is that the more we know about other people, the more different they can seem and the more distant we feel from them. The main reason for this is the belief that different cultures must always have different ways of thinking and acting, an assumption which highlights cultural difference at the cost of neglecting similarities. To reach a more balanced and realistic view of other cultures, we need to ask “what connects us?” when encountering people who seem different, and “what is different between us?” when encountering people who seem much the same. Education, then, has to equip us with the ability to cope with this cultural ambiguity. It should encourage us to see cultural differences as assets, rather than as threats to our own identity.

Interlinked particularities
Development has often been viewed as a unilinear movement towards one single societal model, or, less often, as a multi-linear process in which societies diverge by developing in different ways because they do not share the same foundational principles of rationality and ethics. The process of globalization as it is occurring today, in which cultural diversity also persists, suggests that a third theory of development is more apt: a constructivist model affirming the existence of many distinct cultures that nevertheless remain interconnected and even interdependent, through webs of communication and transportation. According to this model, civilizations do not converge and become the same, but their differences do not preclude communication and cooperation. No civilization is wholly determined by its past; new challenges can bring forth new and creative responses. This makes the dialogue of civilizations more than simply a way to identify common ground. Such dialogue becomes essential for the mutual construction of collective solutions to common problems. This implies a constant process of transformation, in which each party to an inter-civilizational dialogue is not simply an object of transformation, but also participates as an active transformer.

Accordingly, education should emphasize both universality and particularity when teaching a sound understanding of one’s own culture, and when conveying information
and insight into other cultures. The best motivation for people to engage in a dialogue with members of other cultures may be to jointly develop solutions to problems – not only to shared problems, but also to problems particular to specific cultures or civilizations.

**Multi-level approaches to a better education for the dialogue of civilizations**

Since it is the form of education that extends the furthest and usually has the most impact, formal classroom education will be at the forefront of fostering the dialogue of civilizations. To adapt and transform educational principles and curricula to the requirements of a meaningful inter-civilizational dialogue, however, is not only the responsibility of the individual teacher, but calls for cooperative efforts on many levels:

1. Constant efforts should be made to accommodate diversity in classes and in administration at all educational levels, including both formal schooling and adult education programmes.

2. On the national level,
   - school curricula should be developed in a cooperative effort involving members of all cultural groups within the society – including not only ethnic minorities, but different social classes and other groupings;
   - programmes should be established to improve multi-cultural teaching methods through exchange of information, research and training for teachers.

3. On the international level,
   - institutions should be established to advise in curricula development. Such institutions would best function on an intra-regional basis, but with provisions for the inter-regional exchange of information and successful methodologies;
   - other programmes should be implemented that support national efforts for better education in the skills and knowledge necessary for a dialogue of civilizations. New distance learning technologies and concepts can be meaningfully employed to enhance the outreach of such programmes.

4. In addition to these recommendations for formal education, it should be recognized that other institutions in society, including the media, corporations, NGOs, and other information-disseminating organizations, also play a role in the education process. These institutions should therefore be encouraged to provide accurate information and analysis which avoids cultural stereotypes, and to be as inclusive as possible with respect to minority and alternative points of view.
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