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**Education for All in the Language of their Cultural Heritage**

In spite of gloomy predictions, I do not believe that cultural diversity will be one of the casualties of globalisation. Indeed, the cultivation of cultural diversity is one of the great opportunities of today, because we cannot conceive a stronger and a better world in the future without stronger and better individuals. However, strong individuals cannot and do not grow out of a vacuum. They grow out of a cultural background and in order to become strong, especially in this globalised world of ours, they need to know from where they are coming; or in other words who they are. It is the only way for them to be able to react as autonomous individuals to the pressures of today’s world, pressures that regrettably weigh more heavily on some portions of humanity than on others.

I am thinking of the millions of people who leave their homeland in hope of a better life, either because they have no choice or because the alternative is stagnation and poverty or sometimes even oppression and starvation.

This is an immensely difficult and stressful experience: you have to learn a new language, which is not an easy task for anyone; you are without the support network of family and friends; you are confronted with different values, customs, and ways of interacting with people: which means that you are experiencing cultural diversity, but a diversity which only goes in one direction. You must live with the culture of the
other – of those who are at home –, while they are reluctant to acknowledge yours.

This leads to a particular predicament which hundreds of millions of young people in today’s world are subjected to: they are brought up in a society in which the culture of their parents has little or even no recognized value. This can and has lead to two equally bad results. The first is anger towards a society that they perceive as rejecting them with a supposed return to the culture of their parents, which is in fact often a vastly deformed and extreme vision of that culture. The second is a cutting away of one’s roots: suppression and in some cases denial of who one is, in order to become who society expects one to be. Both results are unlikely to foster autonomous individuals contributing as such to a harmonious, peaceful and culturally rich society.

I personally believe that it is rather simple to avoid these two extreme results – and please don’t misunderstand me, I am not saying that the immigrant experience in the world today is exclusively that of either one or the other. Indeed, I believe that there are many examples where second generation immigrants have been able to integrate fruitfully the culture of their parents with that of the society in which they grow up to become fully participating adults. The culture of today and tomorrow is very much that of the creative fusion of elements of diverse cultural origin. However, too often the immigrant experience is that of cultural impoverishment and that can be counteracted by simple measures taken in schools in countries with significant numbers of immigrants.

Allow me to take as an example my own country, Iceland. Formerly one of the poorest countries of Europe, and only
recently one of its richest, also quite isolated as an island in the North Atlantic, we have had little historical experience of immigration and until a little over ten years ago the number of foreigners choosing to live in Iceland was very small, most of them coming for sentimental reasons, having met an Icelandic man or woman and choosing to spend their life with him. Now this situation has changed radically and we have a significant number of foreigners living in Iceland, who are becoming Icelandic citizens in increasing numbers and are changing our culturally homogeneous society into one of considerable cultural diversity.

One of the many challenges this brings to us has to do with teaching all of these people to speak Icelandic, one of the oldest languages on the planet since it hasn’t changed in its grammar and basic vocabulary for almost a thousand years. It is also a difficult language, with strange rules and a great number of synonyms which make the language mysterious and poetic, but at the same time dauntingly difficult to master. This is particularly true of their children who are coming into the pre-schools and elementary schools with no or only fragmentary knowledge of our language. Our specialists have found out that a good way to stimulate the learning of Icelandic is to allow the children to study at the same time the language their parents speak at home. Instead of implicitly refusing to acknowledge this language, it is better to consider the child’s experience of linguistic diversity as an asset, as a basis to work on: as a wonderful opportunity, working not only to the benefit of the immigrant child, but also that of the whole class.

There are many reasons for this: the experience of being brought up with two or several languages, that of bi- or
multilingualism is inherently one in which the ability to use language develops, and as a consequence the ability to learn, to interact with others, to shape and to transform one’s own experience. However bi- or multilingualism is not as effective if only some of the languages of the user are cultivated, while the other is neglected, becoming only a rather poor one only used for limited communication. By allowing the immigrant children to study formally the language of their parents, their other abilities are being enhanced, among them their ability to master the language of the society in which they live. In this way they can achieve more for themselves and their families, and also contribute more to the society.

For the mono-lingual children, those who are not daughters or sons of immigrants, this can also be a first and important experience of linguistic diversity, opening up to them the interest for acquiring a new language. For all, this will foster their awareness of cultural diversity, and give them an inkling of the great cultural wealth of humanity. The immigrant children receive a strong message that their culture is not something to hide – or implicitly to be ashamed of. On the contrary, it is a heritage to be proud of, giving them a stronger sense of who they are: a sense of self or identity that can only strengthen the individual.

Regrettably, the experiments made in this direction have been cut short in some of the Nordic countries I mentioned. It is for budgetary reasons, which to my mind are very short-sighted, because even though it does cost money to have teaching staff capable of helping these children cultivate their own linguistic and cultural heritage, I can assure you that the investment is a wise and profitable one.
As a nation, I hope we Icelanders will be wise enough to invest in making our new experience of cultural diversity a fruitful one for all: for the people who choose to live among us, to become part of us, but also for those of us who have their cultural roots in Iceland’s past. Perhaps more than others, we should be able to understand that allowing the new Icelanders to cultivate the culture of their ancestors is the best way forward. After all, we owe our independence, and therefore the prosperity we enjoy today, to the strong sense of self, our pride for our heritage, that came from the cultivation of a culture and of a language that was not only of value to ourselves but also recognized by others.

One of the things that I hope will support this endeavour in Iceland and the rest of the world, are initiatives such as those being taken in my home city Reykjavík at the University of Iceland. The professors of languages there decided to name their research institute The Vigðís Finnbogadóttir Institute of Foreign Languages and are now actively working on creating a World Language Centre. This centre will pool the expertise of specialists of many languages from many countries. It will also cater to the needs of non-specialists, for example with the creation of “virtual museum of languages”, where examples of every language can be heard and observed. It will be an exciting place, using information technology and new media to enable visitors – among them children – to enable visitors to experience the wonderful diversity of human languages.

More importantly, the creation of the World Language Centre gives a strong message to the world: a message of respect – which by the way is a term that can be translated into every language. Through respect for others, for their culture, for their language, one also learns respect for one self. And it is
through self-respect that one becomes a stronger and more generous individual. Humanity needs many more of those.