Opening education systems to cultural diversity: The key roles of curriculum, language, and teachers

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A critical contemporary issue, cultural diversity has constantly been central to UNESCO's mission and activities.

As Irina Bokova, the UNESCO Director General, rightly points out, “The diversity of the world's cultures is our wealth and our future. It is high time”, she goes on, “to increase our investment in cultural diversity and dialogue for development” (UNESCO 2010b). This insightful statement reinforces UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which sees cultural diversity as a “common humanity heritage”, which is “as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature” (UNESCO 2001, Art. 1). Indeed, cultural diversity is a driving force for economic, social, and human development. Also, culture is seen as playing an essential role in reaching the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015, a view reinforced by the participants at the MDG Summit, held in September 2010, in New York (UNESCO 2010a).

However, the task of achieving and preserving cultural diversity continues to be both complex and difficult. Questions related to promoting cultural diversity are usually riddled with contradictions and divisions over how to deal with complex issues, including social stratification, ethnic and racial discrimination, and economic disadvantages. Also, current globalization processes embody contradictory tendencies, as they can be a force of “homogenization”, “heterogeneity”, “hybridization”, and/or “polarization” of divergent cultures (Holton 2000; Tomlinson 1999). In addition, “new global cultural flows shape new constructions of local identity and community” (Singh 2004). In parallel, we are witnessing a growing phenomenon of international migration, which has reached unprecedented levels throughout the world. Be they voluntary immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, or just sojourners, migrants are likely to experience a convergence of heritage-cultural and receiving-cultural practices, values and identifications (Berry 2006; Schwartz et al. 2010). The growing international migration also leads, in some cases, to “novel cultural expressions, demonstrating that diversity is ever in the making” (UNESCO 2009, p. 7). The role of education is more crucial than ever in bridging cultural differences, while maintaining the diversity of cultural expressions.

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Writing about cultural diversity and education presents a demanding challenge, as much of any discourse on the topic is locked up in further debates over closely related issues of equal intricacy, such as social justice, social cohesion, equity, democracy, and citizenship. It is also difficult to write illuminatingly about issues that are often divisive and deeply rooted in historical, social, cultural and power-based inequalities in society. Abdeljalil Akkari and Colleen Loomis have risen to this challenge successfully, by guest-editing a special issue that will certainly become an essential contribution to the current debates on the topic. They bring into view some of the most central and most contentious issues on cultural diversity, as they relate to curriculum, language, history teaching; interethnic relations; and much more. The authors discuss the role of ethnicity, cultural similarities/differences, and discrimination in schools, offer case studies of monolingual and international schools, and call for studies on the role that context plays in the acculturation process. Yet, this special issue is not simply a collection of articles on a given topic. Its focus is sharpened by an international and comparative perspective, which is intended to yield a fuller understanding of complex processes and their relationships to contextual and individual functioning.

The articles argue for a more vigorous opening of educational systems to cultural diversity. This can be done by grounding necessary education reforms, designed within the appropriate legal and policy frameworks, in teachers' actual actions in the classroom and their relationships with students. Education reforms that address only a specific issue in relation to cultural diversity, without taking into account other features of the education system, may, in fact, fail to promote cultural diversity. The proper alignment of education goals, curriculum, and teaching and learning practices is necessary. A case in point is described by Suseela Malakolunthu and Nagappan Rengasamy in their article on Malaysia, where changes were made to use the indigenous language in schools but other aspects of education retained traditional practices.

Behind this special issue lie two assumptions. First, various languages, cultural practices, values, and identifications are seen as important resources, offering broad perspectives on cultural diversity. Ethnic and national identities are inherently subjective and carry different meanings for different individuals. Therefore, the editors and the authors argue for taking into account students' views on these constructs, along with teachers' actions in the classroom and their relationships with students.

Second, schooling is culturally and politically constructed as a "historical product of particular groups with particular interests and values specific to a particular moment in the history of a society" (Introduction, in this issue). As many nations still wrangle over the continuities and discontinuities in their past and present, cultural diversity continues to have many shapes and many histories. Changes to the curriculum need to make the content of education relevant to pluralistic societies.

Conceived in the spirit of dialogue, this special issue proposes an expansion of the cultural diversity concept, which is closely linked to inclusive and citizenship education, and encompasses an international and comparative perspective. I hope that the issues raised here can help to open up new, potentially productive lines of inquiry, while also encouraging more education systems to respect, promote and invest in cultural diversity. As UNESCO's director general observes, "this is long term work. The challenges are great but the rewards are greater" (UNESCO 2010b).

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