Quo Vardis? Education for what purpose?

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Introduction

If we are seeking to educate for a better world, we cannot avoid but having a vision of that world. There are many visions of "the good society." Burke, de Tocqueville, Popper, Lippman and others have a point when they attack the attempts to impose a utopia, a new world order. So often these have become not a bright vision, but a nightmare, or at best a delusion. But as Alabaster and Lukes (1971) point out, the distinction between realism and utopianism is itself misleading and value-loaded, indeed a polemic distinction, serving to conceal the value premises from which it is made. There are variations in the visions of a desirable society within every nation and the forces which maintain the basic social institutions (including the family, work, education) within which human development takes place.   In defining the purpose of education, we must first generate a shared vision of the kind of society do we wish to create.

Towards a Shared Vision

We live in a world in which some 10,000 societies, each with their own culture, co-exist in about 200 states. Building peace and resolving conflicts globally or within any society is not possible unless there is an underlying unity in the diversity of cultures and religions. Much of my work of UNESCO has involved the quest for that unity, for a set of shared values underlying the diversity of visions and beliefs about the "good society' that all societies and recognized religions accept.   The Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development (UNESCO, 1995) defines these underlying common values as "global ethics" and sees the principles of democracy, peace, human rights and pluralism as basic ingredients. But at the same time, it is a global ethic that stresses respect for the dignity and worth of every individual, every culture. How then does one combine the universality of core values with an acknowledgement of different cultures, social interests and individual freedoms?

Somehow we must find a way around the impossible choice between a mass culture which unites the world in the consumption of the same products and the differentialism which confines us all in closed communities unable to communicate other than through the market or violent conflicts. Our vision and action must combine universalistic principles with cultural differences, and our debates about the purposes of education must include and respect everybody, every cultural and social group, particularly the excluded. Peace and security cannot exist without the recognition of a universalist principle which prevails over both the instrumental reason which rules the economy and over cultural diversity. Education must not be merely a means of strengthening society: it must also serve to build individual personalities capable of innovating, resisting and communicating, affirming their universal right and acknowledging that of others, to participate in the modern technical age with their own personalities, memories, languages and desires.

Unity in diversity is difficult, but it is the only option. Co-operation between people from different cultures and visions for the future will be facilitated and conflict kept within acceptable constructive limits, if we see ourselves as being bound by shared commitments. Studies and debates undertaken within the framework of the Universal Ethics Project (UNESCO, 1995), the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century (UNESCO, 1996) and the World Education Fellowship Global Preferred Futures Project (Campbell et al., 2005) demonstrate that there is wide agreement on the basic values and principles which lie at the heart of what it means to be human and that need to be the focus of education programs.   This work reaffirms the centrality of values relating to human rights as articulated in the Universal Declaration.   The challenge is that of ensuring these values are at the centre of our efforts to define educational priorities and practices, rather than those which are based on a given economic ideology or imposed by any powerful political, economic, religious or cultural group.

Human Rights and the Purpose of Education

The concept of human rights as currently formulated in the Universal Declaration is a comparatively recent invention. It is just 50 years old, but its origins stem from the historic struggle for freedom, equality and justice. Its formulation has been strongly influenced by the declarations of American independence (1776) and the French Revolution (1789). At the both the national and the international level, we can find many carefully constructed and agreed statements of about human rights and the purposes of education. Of course, each statement reflects the time and context in which it was framed. But what is remarkable is the extent to which each statement reflects the basic principles set out in the Universal Declaration.

There are three key elements in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that focus on education:

1. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages, Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally available on the basis of merit.

2.   Education shall be directed to the full development of the 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.

3.   Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children. (Articles 26.1 to 26.3)

Article 26.1: The Right of All to Education

In the fifty years that have passed since the Declaration was proclaimed, almost all countries have ratified it, and thus are legally bound by its Articles. A surprisingly large number of national educational laws contain the key elements of Article 26.   Education for All is an essential condition for participatory democracy, and repeatedly nations around the

world on occasions have reaffirmed the principle of free, compulsory basic education for all, and access to post-basic education opportunities without discrimination.

For most of the 20th century, there has been a broad agreement about the basic purposes of education in countries like Australia, and the responsibilities of government to protect the right to education as enshrined in the Universal Declaration. Australian governments assumed responsibility for establishing, funding and maintaining a strong, equitable public education system. In return, our educational institutions were expected to help build a productive, just, equitable and cohesive democracy.

In the aftermath of September 11 and the constant push to apply market principles to education, the basic rights and freedoms that we have assumed to be the essence of a liberal democracy are being eroded. As the 2000 World Education Report (UNESCO, 2000) concluded it has been "through apparently small 'exceptions' to particular rights – as the result of a long string of small incidents- that the hopes embodied in the Declaration as a whole" are being undermined. If, it asks, "different principles are emphasised today over those embodied in one or more of the rights proclaimed in the Declaration, especially the right to education, how can it be convincingly explained to young people that such rights, indeed any rights proclaimed in the Declaration, are inalienable?"

The real commitments of governments are reflected in how much and on what they chose to invest. Investment in public education in Australia is now one of the lowest in the developed world. Australia has always prided itself as being a fair and equitable nation. But, in the past twenty years, the gaps between the rich and the poor have rapidly widened, making Australia now one of the least equitable of the OECD nations. The gaps in the education available to the rich and the masses have also widened, as have the differences in participation rates and achievement levels between schools with high concentrations of students from professional homes and those serving the lower SES communities (ACER, 2003). The need for redistributive funding, greater equity and stronger social justice frames is "probably greater that at any time in the post World War Two period" (Lingard & Mills, 2003; Tesse et al., 2003).

The amount and quality of education available to Australians (and increasingly in other countries as well) is now very much dependent on one's ability to pay. The Australian government is now sees access to quality education beyond the compulsory years as a "privilege" not as a human right. Indeed human rights are rarely mentioned or feature in legislation put forward by the governments of countries like Australia and USA post September 11. If education is to contribute to the creation of a more just and equitable society and to the survival of democracy , we cannot continue on a market driven path that leads to greater inequality, a polarised education system and an illiberal "democracy" built on a culture of fear, protection of privilege and abuse of power . Too often, I have been asked to help deal with the violence created by divided education systems in places like Algeria, Bosnia, Haiti, Northern Ireland and South Africa. I must warn that the more we unequal and divided our schools become, the more fragmented, polarised and unstable our society will become.

The Delors Report challenges policy makers to face up squarely to their responsibilities to ensure that "education is a public good that should be available to all." Governments must

renew their commitment to both the letter and the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on Discrimination in Education.

Article 26.2: Individual Development and Living Together

Renewing our commitment to the spirit of the Universal Declaration must take us beyond the rhetoric of "the full development of the human personality" to insist that governments and education systems fulfil their responsibility to develop the potential of all individuals, particularly those "at risk" of dropping out early and being marginalised in the global knowledge economy of the 21st century. Governments are calling on schools to pay greater attention to challenges facing by youth in general, and in particular to the problems of the 'underclass' which exists, to a greater or lesser degree, in every school.   Co-operation between schools and their communities in developing effective policies and programmes to address these problems then will increasingly become a priority issue.

The results of most research on the effectiveness of schools serving disadvantaged communities are fairly consistent with what we know about learning organizations and good management. Effective schools do have effective instructional leadership, provide the 'tough caring' needed by all students, and work hard at creating a sense of community. Effective schools also expect all their students to learn, and provide the support needed for all to achieve. Parents and the school community are well informed about what is happening in the school and work closely in partnership with it.

The research on adolescent depression, suicide and high-risk behaviour reaffirms the importance of the protective function of caring and connectiveness in the lives of young people, "particularly a sense of connectiveness to family and to school."   It also points to the importance of joint initiatives by government departments, school, youth support groups and local communities that focus on life skills and relationship building to ensure the support and community connections needed by young people "at risk."

The commitment to full development of potential must also include the quest for excellence and quality covering the diversity of needs and aspirations of our students ranging from sport to the creative arts, from philosophy to physics. Our education systems needs to show that they value excellence in a much wider range of fields than traditionally has been seen to be prestigious in education and the focus of selection and reward systems in education. We can and should expect all of our students to perform at a high level, and make sure that we give them the support needed to do so.

Insisting on excellence and rigour in research, teaching and learning is particularly crucial in higher education. The development of the critical capacity of individuals, organizations and society is at the core of learning to learn throughout life and any rigorous teaching or research program. If the spirit of Article 26.2 of the Declaration is to be realised, higher education must extend critical reason to include critical self-reflection and critical action, even if this is uncomfortable for governments with poor environmental and human rights records.

In a globalised world, computer-based technologies can and must reduce intellectual isolation, make it possible for students to have access at least virtually to equipment and experiments which would otherwise be too expensive, provide ever more immediate access to the latest knowledge, and promote intercultural dialogue and understanding. Our education institutions must serve as a "learning commons" for public and private organizations, and community groups. They would focus on learning, on "productive pedagogies" and rich learning tasks to promote understanding, critical thinking, creativity and problem solving at a very high level. And education systems would make strategic use of on-line

learning and co-operative learning activities to ensure that students learn to know, to do, to live together and to be, and to develop their individual talents and critical capacities. For a key purpose of education must include be to promote a love of learning, developing the capacity to learn how to learn, to cope with super-complexity and change, and a deep commitment to learning throughout life.

For 12 years in UNESCO, I worked with many newly established countries and those recovering from violent conflicts to build or rebuild their education systems. Whether it was Bosnia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Rwanda, Palestine or South Africa, the first priority was that of building national unity and a culture of peace.

Countries like Australia recognizes that education is "crucial for nation building, promoting an informed awareness and critical understanding of our heritage, national identity, societal values and mutual interdependence" (MCEETYA, 2000). Or as the Delors Report succinctly puts it: "learning to live together." But we have yet to achieve that ideal. Recently, the ACER (2003) published a report on Australian students' knowledge and beliefs regarding citizenship and democracy. The study found that only half of Australian 14 year-olds have a grasp of the essential pre-conditions for a properly working democracy, and that they have a low level of support for civic engagement compared with their international peers.

A vital pedagogical pillar in learning to live together is the non-violent resolution of conflicts. We need to begin early to teach our children that violence in all forms, including bullying, is unacceptable in our schools and community. All our students must learn about their rights and responsibilities as Australian citizens. But we must also take the next step. If I do have a criticism of Australia's Discovering Democracy Project, it is that it too much about Australia and too little about democracy at the international level, a vital issue in our shrinking global village. We need to help students to become world citizens. We do need to include in the curriculum, a critical study of global issues and the role played by the UN and international NGOs in dealing with them. In my view, supporting the international effort to provide education for all and to resolve conflicts peacefully are likely to do more to reduce the threat of terrorism than resorting to pre-emptive military action without UN approval.

A central element in defining the purpose of education must be the development of responsible and critical citizenship. We need to help our students to understand the causes of conflict, terrorism and war. We need to help teachers to develop productive pedagogies that help students to think critically about both global and local issues, and to develop into responsible and active Australian and global citizens. Exemplary programs (Campbell et al., 2005; Deutsh et al., 2000) encourage the development of conflict resolution skills, critical thinking and problem solving, and include such themes as racism, respecting other cultures, participation in responsible political action, and world citizenship.

A key purpose of higher education, in my view, is that of producing graduates who not only excel in their chosen specialised field, but who are responsible and active citizens both of their own nation and of the world. Higher education institutions must actively support research and community service activities that contribute to the protection of human rights, the environment, sustainable development and the building of a culture of a peace and non-violence.

The greatest threat in the global knowledge market is that the knowledge generated through research, which is traditionally a public good available to all, might become a private good reserved only for those who can pay for it. The greatest threat to democracy is the erosion of the critical capacity of society institutions (particularly the university) to defend our basic rights and freedoms in what are increasingly illiberal democracies at home and abroad. To do so, necessitates the rebuilding of the system of checks

and balances, and restoring the autonomy and capacity of universities to act in support of the public good.

Young people also need to be provided with educational experiences that enable them to explore life pathways. Pathways and futures are about building identity, about pursuing goals, about "learning to be" and "learning to care." Education is an inner voyage, an ongoing process of critical exploration and integration of values into consistent behaviours and action. The valuing process must be embedded in learning activities across the curriculum and through the daily life of the school.

Article 26.3: Parents, Communities and the State

Historically, most schools were established within the framework of the religious organizations that were the backbone of community life. Industrial and political revolutions precipitated the rise of the nation-state. By the end of the nineteen century, the State had assumed responsibility for mass schooling. It was the abuse of this function by totalitarian regimes during World War 2 that led to the inclusion of Article 26.3 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. For education is not the same as indoctrination, whether that indoctrination be the intent of a fascist state, religious extremists, or economic or political ideologists.

In Australia, centralised State bureaucracies controlled all aspects of public education until the early 1970s. The Karmel Report placed the issue of devolution and community involvement in education on the national agenda, emphasising that less (rather than more) centralised control over the operation of schools was necessary to assure effectiveness and equity. Since then, Australian governments followed the global trend in adopting decentralisation and school-based management policies shifting much of responsibility for the day-to-day management of schools to the local level. At the same time, governments have retained overall responsibility for establishing the framework of goals, resources, curricula, assessment and accountability systems within which schools operate.

For all communities, having a local school dedicated to serving its needs is extremely important for its well-being. For rural and indigenous communities, developing win-win partnerships is a matter of life or death. If schools are to serve their communities, the question of who controls education, who owns the school, is crucial. In many parts of the world, indigenous peoples live in countries is controlled by a dominant cultural group, one in which the schooling has been about assimilation, and in the process destroyed key elements of indigenous culture, and with that, the identity and dignity of indigenous peoples. On the basis of their research on indigenous learning styles, several universities have worked with Aboriginal communities to develop a model of "two-way schooling." The community was given greater control over the management of the school, curriculum and learning activities, and the school contributed to building community leadership, identity and self-worth. The basic lesson that comes out of the research is that education authorities, schools and teachers need to understand and respect the rights and world view of the community, and its efforts to educate their children for life in a bi-cultural world.

Many governments have come to the view that the teaching of democracy and one's rights and responsibilities as citizens are important for schools and their communities. The UK policy on education for citizenship, for example, aims at no less than a change in the political culture of the country: for students to learn to think of themselves as active citizens. In essence, education systems must give a much higher priority to learning to live together, and to building global as well as local communities. Learning to live together requires that schools must provide opportunities for successful joint ventures and exchanges with the diversity of groups within its community, learning to resolve

conflicts within the community and the school peacefully, and establishing formal and informal ways of demonstrating that community service is valued.

In one sense, the effort to reconnect schools and their communities takes us back to the little red schoolhouse, to a school which is very much an integral part of its community, a site for multiple services, and the door linking its students with adult life and work. The best schools in Australia and in throughout the world that I have visited are the hub of community life – educational, cultural, vocational and social. In some cases, corporations have provided the latest technology to a secondary school, been actively involved in designing programmes and in teaching, provided scholarships and work experience opportunities, and supported professional development of staff. In others, world-class musicians and artists have freely given of their time and expertise. In others, students learn to care by working actively in community projects with the aged or the disabled.

Conclusion

Now that almost all young people are engaged in education, schools, colleges and universities cannot just be places of instruction: they are a community in which all facets of the human personality are being forged. As Dewey long ago insisted: a school (or university) is life. It must reach out to its community and respect the right of parents to chose the type of education appropriate for their child. And if the basic needs of all children and adolescents are to be met, the community must also reach out to the school. Colleges and universities too must engage with their communities – for we cannot hope to achieve the purposes for education set out in the Universal Declaration if we fail to build strong communities and strong partnerships between them and the educational institutions set up to serve them.

Education is a long-term process, the basic direction of which is set in three major developmental contexts – the family, the local community and the school. If all three are strong, caring and rich contexts for learning to know, to do, to be and to live together, and if they are work together, we are much more likely to be successful in preserving and developing those human values and competencies that lie at the heart of the kind of future we want for our children and society.

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