

Education for Intercultural Understanding, from Policy to Practice

Human dignity cannot be bended much. We cannot say that all people are equal, except Hindus, Africans, lesbian or another group. The moment we have an exception, then we have a discriminatory attitude. In order to succeed in intercultural understanding, one must look at the language of politicians, in the plan documents, teachers and school managers' views on language they use to define different groups in the society and diversity among students. Students with ethnic Norwegian background is also a natural part of this diversity

If we look 15-20 years ahead, what kind of knowledge, skills and personal qualities should our children have to succeed in the workplace and the social life? I think multilingual, multicultural competence, inter-cultural meetings, ability to cooperate across cultures/ religions and languages, ability to solve problems and conflicts, and the ability to see what binds humans together, must be important qualifications. If our children are to succeed in the adult world, then daycare or kindergarten, and schools must already today arrange for our children to receive the necessary expertise and the right attitudes to face the reality of security about 15-20 years ahead. The kindergartens and schools must change.

The policymakers, politicians and the media must be aware of how their rhetoric, language and policy work on the students' ability to succeed in Norway. If pupils are often referred to as a problem, it will affect the expectations teachers have for students, and pupils' view of themselves and their opportunities. For example, if the minorities in a country are defined by their crime statistics, it is difficult to demonstrate that one of the most important values in the country is equality. Or if minority groups are set up against the other groups in vulnerable situation, or society is divided into “us” and “you”, then it will affect the attitudes of both minorities and the majority population.

Intercultural institution

There are many ways in which to understand culture and diversity. Kindergarten and schools must reflect on what they mean by being an intercultural institution. What does this mean in practice for the individual student and the community? The way kindergarten or schools defines its intercultural reality, will be of importance for the practice and values in the institution. If a teacher or an educator has negative attitudes towards children or people from other cultures or religions, or the diversity between children and parents are not appreciated, then no national action plans or laws have a real effect to make this kindergarten or school an intercultural institution.

How are students and their parents defined by the media, politicians, and educationalists? The way statistics are kept, the type of research being done on minorities, etc. will affect the intercultural practice. Do we look for opportunities and solutions or do we look for problems and challenges, when we talk about intercultural society?

Leadership in an intercultural educational institution is not just to deal with cultural differences, religious differences, or language differences. But it is first and foremost to meet people with different abilities, personalities and different life experiences. It is also about finding common values that all can agree on. It is about looking for similarities and focus on what everyone can agree on. This means values that bind people together, giving all students the opportunity to learn to see common features among people, cultures, and not the least religions.

I am also concerned about the language used to define minorities, for example, the concept of minority-language students. There are many negative associations added to being a student from a minority language group in Norway. For how many generations are we going to define them as minority-language students? When is a student multilingual? We are missing the assessment that qualifies students to become multilingual. I'm not sure if minorities are best served by

having an institution who works with minority issues, without qualifying them to become a part of the “us” or including society.

The teacher must build bridges between people, not between cultures. These bridges must be built continuously, all the time. The bridge is built on the similarities that bind people together, where the individual identity is developed. To succeed with the goal to make Education for Intercultural Understanding, we must be willing to build a society based on community, safety, equality and opportunity, and recognize the multicultural society and competences as strengths and necessities to succeed as a nation.

Tree with a plastic bag around the roots

When one buys a tree from a nursery, it is often a pot or a bag around the roots. This is because when one should move a plant from a location to another, it must be the roots that give the wood the basis for growth, protected from damage until the tree's transplant.

The same happens when people move from one place to another. When people for example move from Sri Lanka to Norway, they will be caught up from the earth with their roots. Completely unconsciously, they make a net, a jug or a plastic bag around its "core vulnerability" in a restructuring process. This plastic bag protects their identity, language, traditions, religion, emotions related to a

country they have left, etc. Many continue to keep their plastic bag around the roots year after year, and thus live physically in Norway and emotionally in their country. It affects the well-being and adaptation in the new country. When the bag stays on year after year, the roots cannot nourish the tree. It will have consequences for the fruits that grow on the tree. A tree will not be judged by the roots, but by the quality of fruits that grow on the tree.

Eventually, parents must begin to remove parts of the plastic bag so that they can come to anchor in the new earth. It doesn't mean that they have to give up their background and their identity. But it means that they have to cooperate with the new society so that they can guide and support their children, in order for the children to succeed in school and in life. Some are talking about integration, but it's really about safety, acceptance and belonging to a society and a nation. It is not the number of years in Norway that determines whether people thrive in this country or not, but it is the meeting between the people, and the experiences they make in the new country, which is essential for the well-being. It is difficult to take off the plastic bag and plant the tree in the new earth if it is a very cold environment around the tree. In this process the community must also be willing to make it possible to remove the plastic off the roots of the new tree.

All parents want to be good parents for their children, also in a new country. But it is possible that the demands the society makes of them, are difficult to understand in practice. It is easy to understand why one should take the plastic bag off, but it is difficult to understand how one can be integrated.

The children do not grow up in the same society, in the same climate or in the same environment as their parents did. Therefore, it will be important to have a good dialogue and openness and interaction with the children and anchor values and norms in them. Safety, dialogue, and care will be the best nutrients for the "roots".

I have no faith in that we can succeed with intercultural dialogue and understanding, if not we see how this affects different people in practice. If we continue to lead segregated politics, continues to have our own institutions for minorities, without ever being eligible to go over the ordinary institutions which are for the majority group, and if we continue to use a language or terminology that create distinctions between people in a negative way, we can never succeed with our vision.

We must, in the spirit of Wergeland, learn to see similarities and appreciate the similarities between humans, before we can handle

the differences. We must learn to build bridges between people, before we can build bridges between cultures.

Strong feet and strong roots

We live in a mobile world where people increasingly are in a moving process. Families move much more than they did a couple generations back. There are many reasons for moving. It may be because of war, persecution, marriage, divorce, work, studies, assistance, etc. This means that the kindergarten and the school will meet children and parents who for a shorter or longer period of time are in a state characterized by relational violations and establishing relationships. Many adults are often concerned that people will have strong roots, but I think that the focus should be just as much about giving children strong feet. Relocation and restructuring requires strong feet, a strong self and a stable in the unstable. Children or adults who have moved much of his childhood or his life, often have the roots in their hearts, they are not attached to a particular country or place.

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