

Education for Shared Values for Intercultural and Interfaith Understanding

Call to Action, Adelaide, December 2004

The conference on *Education for Shared Values for Intercultural and Interfaith Understanding* was organised by the Australian National Commission for UNESCO and National Commissions and other agencies of the Asia-Pacific region in the belief that education has a key role to play in the immediate and long-term process of building peace and intercultural and interfaith understanding. The conference supports other UNESCO priorities, especially in the areas of peace and education for all.

The conference recognises that education institutions operate in local, global and multicultural contexts that often involve conflicts between peoples, injustices, illiteracy, poverty, extremism and intolerance. The conference also recognises that education institutions work alongside other institutions, including families, cultural and religious institutions, governments, the business community, NGOs, and the media, all of which have the potential to promote shared values, mutual understanding and respect. The success of educators in advancing these objectives will be enhanced by effective partnerships and dialogue with parents, other institutions and local communities, and through the direct involvement of young people themselves.

The conference calls on education systems and institutions to explore ways of incorporating into curricula: (1) common and agreed values; and (2) educational content capable of promoting intercultural and interfaith understanding.

Education curricula should promote and reflect shared human values that go to the heart of what it means to be human. These values—shared by diverse cultural and faith traditions but also extending beyond them—do not deny value differences, but are essential to preserving the dignity and rights of individuals and the harmonious co-existence of people of all cultures and faiths. These shared values include the non-violent resolution of conflicts. UNESCO has a role to play in supporting the development of consensus and clarity around a set of shared human values and in promoting values-based quality education.

A basic understanding of the diverse range of cultures and faiths and their histories is a starting point towards greater mutual understanding and respect. Such understanding also is important in challenging stereotypes and preconceived ideas. For these reasons it is important that school curricula include among their objectives an understanding and appreciation of the diversity of human cultures, practices and beliefs.

The conference calls on education systems to review, build and promulgate knowledge about the most effective ways of promoting values and intercultural and interfaith understanding through pre-school, school and tertiary curricula.

There is evidence that the formation of values is facilitated by their application and exploration in a range of practical and experiential contexts across the curriculum. Reflective and critical thinking and dialogue are important to the internalisation and application of values. The development of intercultural and interfaith understanding is more likely to result from direct personal experience (eg, cultural exchanges/immersion, opportunities to share cultural traditions, celebrations, music, languages, etc) than from indirect teaching about cultures. There is also evidence to support the use of multiple instructional approaches, local community resources and youth networks.

There is a need for further research to identify effective educational practices in the development of intercultural and interfaith understanding. Better assessments, improved indicators of effectiveness, improved systems for recognising and acknowledging successful teaching, and better ways of disseminating models of effective practice are desirable.

The conference recognises the importance of establishing institution-wide cultures that model and support intercultural and interfaith understanding.

The intention to promote shared values and intercultural and interfaith understanding through curricula is unlikely to succeed if it is not supported by an institutional ethos and policies that reflect values such as non-discrimination, inclusivity, equality, equity, respect and justice. Educational leaders have a responsibility for valuing and building learning cultures that are child-centred and that ensure a sense of security, self-esteem, open discussion, harmony and mutual respect.

The conference recognises the necessity of preparing and supporting teachers to model and promote values for intercultural and interfaith understanding.

The development of intra- and intercultural and interfaith understanding across the curriculum has significant implications for pre-service and in-service teacher education programs. Quality teaching of shared human values requires new levels of personal commitment and competence on the part of teachers, in already overcrowded school curricula. Teachers must be supported with time and resources for collaboration (eg, staff exchanges) and to undertake local research into best practice.

The conference calls on governments and UNESCO to support the development and exchange of quality teaching resources for intercultural and interfaith understanding.

The pressures under which education institutions operate and current low levels of teacher preparation to teach values for intercultural and interfaith understanding are creating a need for the cooperative development of high quality teaching resources, access to outside professionals, and time for reflection on practice. Resources should include online materials, resources targeted at specific needs (eg, conflict and post-conflict situations), and positive uses of the mass media. Advice to teachers on how to incorporate and adapt materials to local contexts also is required. UNESCO's Associated Schools Project network is an essential mechanism for advancing this objective.