

‘Education for All’ or Education for Wisdom?

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Mass Education as the Handmaiden of Globalization

One of the greatest obstacles to creating learning societies for the future is the model of western culture (and by default, the model of education) being promoted by globalization. Sometimes called ‘Americanization’ of the ‘rest of the world’, the processes of globalization have amplified the modernity project manifold, supported by mass education and communication technologies, particularly the Internet and the mass media (“virtual colonization”¹). Its promoters argue that globalization is creating an improved economic climate, within which educational, health and other cultural improvements will thrive. However, the economic and cultural standards, by which such ‘improvement’ is measured, mask a deeper, more far-reaching and profound cultural transgression that is emerging in the literature on the impact of globalization. It is increasingly perceived by many non-western academics and researchers as “a form of western ethnocentrism and patronizing cultural imperialism, which invades local cultures and lifestyles, deepens the insecurities of indigenous identities, and contributes to the erosion of national cultures and historical traditions.”²

It is well known that education is the most powerful method of enculturating (even ‘brainwashing’) a people. Mass education, which transplants an educational model from one cultural system (such as Euro-American) into another very different culture, while retaining the original standards and categories of knowledge, is tantamount to cultural genocide.³ In a critique of the model of education put forward a decade ago at the Education for All (EFA) meeting in Jomtien, Thailand, a number of educationists and social activists cite this model as being a further attempt to assert the values and culture of the western materialist paradigm.⁴

With regards to the goal of increasing literacy levels, the concept of literacy itself has never been contested by the World Bank.⁵ And yet, in the West itself, the narrow conceptualisation of literacy as the ‘new supreme force’ has been undergoing serious critique from some educationists and futures researchers for decades. Overvaluing ‘textual literacy’ (reading and writing text), as compared with broader categories of human expression (“social literacy”, “oral literacy”, “emotional literacy”), reflects a narrowly-defined conceptualisation of human intelligence. Although the literature on multiple intelligences, cognitive holism, the value of artistic education and oral literacy has been growing in the West for decades,⁶ it seems that the World Bank programs have overlooked their impact.

Educational and youth futures researchers, aware of the failure of the western educational model to provide young people with confidence, hope, a sense of meaning and a love of life-long learning, are engaged in exploring alternative educational processes which transcend the narrow bounds of the three R’s (reading, ‘riting and ‘rithmetic).⁷ Perhaps it is time for the West to learn something from the 90% of the world’s oral cultures, who primarily use symbolic systems of meaning making transfer, such as story-telling, myth and dance⁸ (while these peoples still remember how it is done). The later part of this chapter will discuss alternative educational processes, which arose in the West but which maximize such processes.⁹

A Monoculture in Decline: Challenges from Within

Underpinned by scientific positivism¹⁰ and materialist epistemology,¹¹ and, in recent decades, amplified by information technologies and the economic rationalist paradigm of commodification, the West has claimed cultural superiority since the Enlightenment. With this self-imposed authority (at first European, now American), it has sought to ‘develop’ the ‘underdeveloped world’, using the paradigms of “deficit” and “disadvantage” rather than “diversity” as its justification.¹² Yet ironically, the ‘over-developed’ western culture has been showing signs of decay for decades.

The litany of symptoms exhibited by many young people of the ‘most developed’ nations, exemplify this fact with great poignancy. Research shows that many youth of the West are increasingly manifesting high rates of depression, eating disorders and other forms of mental illness.¹³ In Australia, there have been increases in youth homelessness, and school truancy which have created an underclass of ‘street kids’, disenfranchised by society, yet often by choice.

Increasing numbers are committing suicide and other violent crimes at an alarming rate, and are expressing a general malaise, loss of meaning and hopelessness about the future.¹⁴ Sohail Inayatullah refers to this as “post-industrial fatigue.”¹⁵ Most of the research on suicide and suicidal ideation also show strong links with depression and also hopelessness about the future.¹⁶ Western culture has recently been described by film director Peter Weir as a “toxic culture”, after a spate of violent school shootings of students, by their fellow students, in the United States.

There are several major factors inherent in the western materialist cultural paradigm, which have contributed to a failure of healthy enculturation of young people. These include the triumph of egoism over community, the manipulation of imagination, the secularisation of culture and the degradation of environment.¹⁷

Individualism versus Community

The current age of the ‘I’ which celebrates self-centred egoism, began in the 60s and 70s with the recognition of (and rebellion against) the injustices involved in the long-term cultural dominance of the ‘wealthy white male’. The various movements for liberation and human rights (feminism, gay, black and indigenous rights movements) set in motion a process where rights began to dominate responsibilities. While not wanting to undermine the gains that have been made in terms of equity and human rights, I feel that, in the process of unmediated individualism, the needs of family and community have often been compromised. As a result of the ensuing breakdown of families and other social structures (linked also to the shift in male-female power relationships), we are seeing an unprecedented fragmentation of the social glue, without which young people are rudderless in their social orientation.

The Colonization of Imagination

Over roughly the same period of time, the imaginations of children and youth have changed; once nourished by oral folk and fairy tales, today they are poisoned by electronic nightmares. Since the advent of TV and video game parlors, followed by the use of computer games (originally designed to train and desensitize soldiers before sending them off to the killing fields), western children and youth have been consistently and exponentially exposed to violent images. Globalization has made this ‘entertainment’ ubiquitous, thus allowing for the subsequent colonization of youth culture and imagination, globally.

The Secularization of Culture

The triumph of secular over spiritual values, coinciding with the widespread crisis of values reflected in post-modernism as a ‘belief’ system, has resulted in a dominant world culture which — although ostensibly Christian — is in practice amoral. Egoism that brings greed in its wake; economic rationalism stripped of principles of social justice; the secularisation of education; the death of churches as inspiring community organizations; and, ultimately, cultural fascism and religious fundamentalism that lead to ethnic cleansing, are all symptoms of societies that have lost connections with moral, ethical and spiritual values.

The Degradation of the Environment

Finally, the culture dominating the global environmental agenda, which values private and corporate profit over community and planet, has been responsible for the systematic and pervasive pollution of our earth, air and water. What message, we might wonder, has this given to our youth?¹⁸

Emancipatory Potential of Globalization

Even whilst the globalization project threatens to be more damaging in its colonising and homogenising power than the original Modernity project (colonialism), it also holds the potential for emancipation. It is suggested by Bhandari that what is needed is to be able to distinguish between the hegemonic and emancipatory potential of the diverse strands of modernity.¹⁹ I feel several emerging opportunities can be harnessed. Some of these, paradoxically, co-exist within the western model itself:

- The inherent focus on individualism in the western paradigm, as discussed above, can be transformational if used selflessly, for the greater good. Individual human agency then becomes a powerful force to counter the homogenizing effects of a dominant monoculture.

- Anti-materialist, humanist, alternative streams within the western educational and cultural paradigm (that have developed in parallel with mainstream culture) are becoming even more active, particularly as materialist culture becomes stronger (such as the educational alternative discussed below).
- The potential of free human beings to use global networks for the common good is beginning to be harnessed. For example, it has enabled many of the above authors to publish and circulate their book on the Internet, thereby sharing their concerns about globalization globally!²⁰

Policy, research and practical processes, like those suggested by Jan Visser,²¹ need to be put in place to foster the emancipatory potential of globalization, to increase these opportunities, and to encourage diversity.

Reclaiming Wisdom as the Goal of Education

The industrial model of education, which underpins mainstream education in the West, and thereby the World Bank's EFA agenda, has not only been critiqued by educationists in the developing world. Over the past decade, much of the youth futures research has demonstrated that many young people in the industrialised world have become fearful of the future, disempowered and disenchanted by the education system.²² These futures researchers recommend more holistic, integrated teaching methods, using imagination (to be elaborated on later), pro-active social skills (such as conflict resolution, cooperative learning methods) and specific futures methodologies (such as creating scenarios, visualising preferred futures, action plans).

It has been strongly argued by some educational futurists that the limitations of the instrumental rationality of western scientific positivism, has rendered it as being well past its 'use-by date',²³ as a viable dominant epistemology for the future. The 'global problematique',²⁴ has become so complex that the rational paradigm, with its fragmented disciplines and specialisations, is completely unable to cope with finding solutions. What is needed is integrated education systems, at both the school and tertiary levels, which are underpinned by higher order knowledge systems and inclusive cosmologies.²⁵ These include the traditional, indigenous knowledge systems of many cultures, as well as such spiritually based cosmologies, or 'perennial philosophies' as are found in the West (for example, the underpinning philosophy of Steiner education, discussed below). Such systems reclaim wisdom as the goal of learning and transformation as the goal of a learning society.

While it is becoming increasingly vital that school and university education are underpinned by such higher order knowledge systems and inclusive cosmologies, this is by no means to suggest that education (and learning) are confined to schools, colleges and universities. The industrial model of education as schooling, confined to factory-like buildings for persons between the ages of four and twenty-something, must urgently be regenerated by spatial and temporal expansion into life-long learning in physical, architectural and social spaces that breathe with the community. The creative imagination required to foster such transformations has been for too long impeded by the limitations of the reductionist school education model as we know it. It will be shown later in this article that cultivation of imagination in education enables young people to have more positive, creative and empowered visions of the future. This would seem to be an important step in creating learning societies with wisdom as their vision.

Visions of a Transformed Society

First and foremost, there would be no one ideal society. As a first premise, my vision of a transformed society would be far removed from the monoculture that globalisation is attempting to impose. The critical value of cultural diversity, to the survival of human society as a whole, would be paramount. This diversity would be found *between cultures*; for example, Chinese and Ayurvedic medicines would be equally valued with western allopathic medicine, so that genuine dialogue between practitioners could actually discover which approach best suited which situation. In addition, the diversity would be found *within cultures*, whereby the plurality of possible ways of knowing would be encouraged at all levels of education, including university learning. Revaluing the arts, practical skills and contemplative processes, as being of equal value with the rational, would contribute to a holistic knowledge paradigm for the future.

However, such a vision could not be implemented without great struggle. Powerful vested interests maintain the status quo, whereby the few play monopoly with the vast majority of the world's power and wealth. They cling desperately to their monocultural myth of globalisation, which commodifies and homogenizes all values into the economic 'bottom line'. In the vision presented here, the economic bottom line would be superseded by what has

become known as the “triple bottom line”, where the impacts of any enterprise/policy on the environment and on the social/human/spiritual ecology, are equally valued with economic impact. But just as it has taken decades for the world’s scientists to admit that disregard for the environment had resulted in global warming, it may take more decades before the grassroots visions suggested here, will develop the critical mass needed for transformation into a learning (rather than consuming) society.

To summarize, this vision of a transformed society would no longer represent a hegemonic,²⁶ linear and hierarchical, global monoculture based on the endless acquisition of fragmented ‘bytes’ of information; but rather, a pluralistic, multi-layered network of cultures within societies, committed to nurturing diverse, meaning-centered, integrated, wisdom based cultures.

An Initiative that Fosters Education for Wisdom

While trekking in some reasonably remote Himalayan villages in Nepal a few years ago, I was taken by the hand by some children, when they discovered that I was (at that time) a teacher. They excitedly ran with me, to show off with pride their new school. It was a dark little square room with straight rows of seats, a blackboard, and some white chalk, and each child had a little piece of black slate so they could “learn to write”. I tried to look happy for them, while inwardly wondering, how is it that only the driest crumbs of the western educational model — which is already failing our own children in droves — is being offered to these lively Nepalese children. I now wonder if this is what is meant by ‘education for all’. And I’m certainly not suggesting that this could be improved by giving these little schools a couple of computers.

Having been involved for 10 years in founding, pioneering and teaching in a Rudolf Steiner school in rural Australia, I have guided numerous children from age six or seven to puberty. As a responsible participant in their (and my) joyous learning of every imaginable subject through stories, drawing, painting, singing, movement, drama, music, poetry, mythology and play, I knew learning could be otherwise. And surprise, surprise! The children also became literate in the process, but not just literate in the narrow sense mentioned in the introduction. They developed what I would call broad literacies: to ‘read’ for meaning, to write creatively, to share, to respect nature, to imagine world’s beyond their immediate one, to have social confidence and to love learning.

The educational processes described here are not new, but they were reactivated for their perennial significance in a child’s education by Rudolf Steiner (1861-1924), in Europe in the 1920s. With great foresight, Steiner, already a century ago, was decrying the limitations of the western materialist cultural model. In the mode of a ‘Renaissance man’ Steiner was a scientist, philosopher and artist who contributed significantly to the fields of education, agriculture (biodynamics), medicine and the arts, lecturing and writing extensively on all imaginable subjects in the first quarter of last century. A futurist and grand theorist, he called for science to be reunited with art and metaphysics through ‘spiritual science’. In addition to valuing the conceptual/rational development of the child and the practical, real life context of education (also recommended by Dewey), Steiner strongly emphasized the cultivation of the imagination through aesthetic, artistic processes and highly valued the use of oral language through poetry, drama and story telling.²⁷

The educational movement, which has grown out of Steiner’s initiative, has resulted in the establishment of hundreds of schools worldwide. Considered by many of its proponents to be an educational ‘model’, this problematic belief has become one of its weaknesses, as some interpreters of Steiner’s approach can be quite dogmatic about processes. In fact, Steiner repeatedly stated that he was not laying down dogma, but rather elucidating knowledge of the wisdom of humanity (anthroposophy). I believe that he intended educators, who were working out of his teachings, to be creative themselves and to reinvent the processes for different contexts (temporal and geographic). There is still great untapped potential in this area, as many are still tempted to transplant a 19th century German educational ‘model’ of schooling into every context.

The conceptual approach of Steiner education is an integrated approach to the development of the child as a whole. In particular, the cultivation of the student’s vivid and healthy imagination (compared with just the dry intellect) is considered to be extremely important. The foremost tool for this in Steiner schools is the use of storytelling as a pre-eminent medium of teaching. Stories and pictures are used with small children to introduce the letters and numbers; with older ones, they are used to teach anything from sewing to complex mathematical and scientific concepts. The content, where possible, is presented thematically and the individual subjects, where possible, are

integrated rather than segregated. For example, geometry may be integrated with biology through studying flower and leaf patterns; mathematics may be woven into music lessons; and important social and moral lessons can easily be integrated with stories of great characters from history.

In addition, the recognition of the fundamental interconnectedness of all things, as a way of knowing and learning, aligns this approach with many indigenous and other non-western epistemologies. This integrated approach is supported today by recent literature on the importance of contextualizing knowledge and proponents of situated learning. The creative arts are also widely used to promote intrinsic motivation, encourage self-esteem and help to give meaning to the subject matter.

Contemporary research that supports the use of imagination, metaphor and visually artistic approaches to education is historically rooted in the Platonic stream of philosophical thought, which values aesthetic education. More broadly, the social, cultural and psychological context for using image, myth and metaphor is supported by the psychological and literary works of Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, and Ken Wilbur. Essentially, these writers critique the Euro-centric Cartesian²⁸ position, which gives importance solely to rational modes of thinking at the expense of other forms of human expression, and instead emphasize modes such as symbolical, contemplative, depictive and mythogenetic.²⁹

In terms of learning theory, Harry Broudy argues for the crucial role of imagery and imagination in forming part of what he calls the *allusionary base* of learning. Here, he refers to the conglomerate of concepts, images, and memories available to us to provide meaning in what we hear or read. Relating more to the connotative (aesthetic/symbolic) rather than the denotative (scientific/functional) use of words, Broudy explains that this context of meaning may be richly developed through poetry, literature, mythology and the arts; these are essentially the stock of meaning with which we think and feel.³⁰ Could it be that the lack of meaning experienced by many western youth today is related to an education that lacks imagination and other non-discursive ways of knowing?

To test my hunch that Steiner-educated students may have a different take on the future from their mainstream educated cohorts, I undertook some research on views and visions of the future with the senior secondary students of the three largest Steiner schools in Australia.³¹ The findings demonstrated that these young people are more positive and hopeful about the future and more empowered that they can effect change, than their mainstream educated counterparts. In spite of having been exposed to similar negative images of the future of the world, they appear to have emerged from this 'hidden curriculum' with their idealism and social activism intact. Unlike many young people who have difficulty imagining a very different future (other than the standard 'techno-fix' solutions to problems), the Steiner students' visions of their preferred futures were very richly developed and also strongly focused on improved social futures. In this research, it was also found that the Steiner educated students also placed human agency at the center of the change that needs to happen if we are to prevent global catastrophe. They listed qualities such as personal development, activism, changes in values (less greed, more spirituality), and caring about the future, as some of the ways that humans, including themselves, need to change.³²

I propose here that, in any given situation, at least two layers of education are taking place: (1) the formal curriculum provided by the school/schooling system; and (2) the meta-layer of education, or the 'hidden curriculum'. The latter is provided by the tacit messages of society/culture, in particular through the mass media, much of which provides negative, fearful images of the future. These messages are of course rapidly colonizing the imaginations of youth globally, as discussed in the beginning of this chapter.³³

With mainstream educated youth, there is a consistency between the two layers of education, in that the style and operation of most mainstream schooling reinforces and supports many of the tacit, negative messages of society. These messages are also embedded in the educational models implanted through the EFA agenda. This consistency between the messages of school and society may leave students with insufficient opportunity to create alternative images of the future, either consciously or tacitly. By contrast, Steiner education has the potential to provide artistic, imaginative, values-based, meaningful educational experiences and processes, which can counter balance the often fragmented, abstract, violent, meaningless and pessimistic messages of our culture provided through the mass media. This raises the question: "How are mainstream schools today, in the West and their carbon copies in the 'non-West', balancing these destructive societal messages about the future for our young people?"

Strengths and Weaknesses of Steiner Education

It may appear that I have biased, overly positive views of Steiner education; however, I am critical of its application in some settings. Overall, from my experience, I see as its strengths that Steiner students develop: a strong, intrinsic motivation for learning; a balanced repertoire of practical, artistic, and social as well as academic skills; a positive self-esteem, regardless of whether they are academically 'bright' or not; and a love of, and respect for, nature. As my research shows, Steiner-educated students also have a sense of confidence and empowerment that they can create a more positive, equitable and just future, and a sense of responsibility that humans (indeed they, themselves) are the key to the future health of society and the planet.

On the other hand, I have seen children who, for whatever reason, did not thrive in this approach, and I have seen teachers and even whole schools, which became too narrow, dogmatic and even 'cultish' in their interpretation of Steiner's ideas. Many of the Steiner schools worldwide, even in Australia and South East Asia, continue to use primarily Euro-centric content rather than local, culture specific material, at best, severely limiting the richness of educational experience, and at worst, contributing to cultural colonization. Many Steiner teachers, through a combination of 'over zealotness' and pedagogical arrogance, have become too out-of-touch with contemporary educational thought and have missed some of the pockets of positive change occurring globally, which may help to keep them 'current'. Finally, some aspects of the overall 'hidden curriculum' of schooling, generally, also occur in Steiner schools. In particular, these schools seem to fall prey to the institutional mentality of teachers (i.e., the school becomes their world), the hierarchical posturing and politics that can occur between individuals, and last but not least, the lack of meta-questioning about whether schools, per se, need to exist at all.

Wisdom Education for Paradigm Transformation

The research described above should not be interpreted in any way to suggest that all students ought to be attending Steiner schools. Rather, it is shared to suggest that a real dialogue of pedagogies, such as that occurring in this collection, might open general education (and EFA) to additional processes that may empower students to create a wiser and more positive future world. If organizations such as the World Bank are serious about developing educational processes 'for all' that will underpin healthier outcomes for young people and for societies in general, the current emphasis on narrow literacy and 'head knowledge' would need to be balanced by 'heart and hand' processes through:

- * the cultivation of the imagination through storytelling and the arts (already well-developed in most of the cultures targeted for 'education');
- * a reinvention of human values to include positive social activism, spirituality, concern for future generations and regard for the "triple bottom line".

If we seek to foster the conditions in which learning societies might flourish, educational processes for the future would need to be more holistic, artistic, imaginative and proactive, enabling the students (of all ages) to feel more committed and empowered to create cooperative, diverse, wise futures for all. An integrated 'head, heart and hands' approach is ideally suited for a much broader implementation, beyond schools as a catalyst for a learning society. Such integrated educational processes, based on a perennial philosophy with an inclusive cosmology, spiritually-based ontology³⁴ and integrated epistemology (regardless of its cultural origins), can provide a source of endless material for life-long learning, which is inclusive of all cultural and ethnic content and diverse processes of implementation. This is, of course, providing that the tendencies, inherent in any such philosophy, towards spiritual arrogance, cultural hegemony and 'cultism' can be overcome in human nature. And that begins with each one of us.

Endnotes

¹ Gupta 2000, pp. 12-13.

² Lemish, Drotner et al. 1998, p. 540.

³ Nandy, 2000.

⁴ Jain, 2000.

⁵ Hoppers, 2000, p. 18.

⁶ Read, 1943; Anderson, 1985; Eisner, 1985; Arnheim, 1989; Gardner, 1996.

⁷ Slaughter, 1989; Gidley, 1996; Hutchinson, 1996.

⁸ Ong, 1982.

⁹ Steiner, 1981.

¹⁰ 'positivism' – empirical scientific thinking, which arose and flourished in the West after the European Enlightenment and has since been the dominant mode of academic discourse.

¹¹ 'epistemology' – a philosophy of knowledge, knowledge system, way of knowing or world-view – sometimes also referred to as a 'school of thought'

¹² Dighe, 2000.

¹³ Bashir and Bennett, 2000.

¹⁴ Eckersley, 1993; Gidley, 1998.

¹⁵ Inayatullah, publication forthcoming.

¹⁶ Beck, Steer et al., 1985; Abramson, Metalsky et al., 1989; Cole, 1989.

¹⁷ Gidley, 2000; www.nr.org.

¹⁸ Gidley, forthcoming.

¹⁹ Bhandari, 2000.

²⁰ Jain, 2000; <www.swaraj.org/shikshantar>

²¹ Visser, 2000.

²² Slaughter, 1989; Eckersley, 1995; Gidley and Wildman, 1996; Hutchinson, 1996.

²³ 'Use-by date' is a term used to define the last date by which commodities, such as food products, are safe to be eaten. I use it here to allude to the commodification and packaging of knowledge and learning in the western model, as if they were products to be consumed rather than processes to be engaged in. In other words, **western scientific positivism is no longer safe for human consumption.**

²⁴ 'Global problematic' is a complex, interdependent set of problems, where the existence of a particular problem is systematically bound into (and dependent on) the existence of other problems.

²⁵ 'Cosmology' – a philosophy of the cosmos or universe. Higher order or inclusive cosmologies refer to inclusive world views that integrate knowledge of human nature with an esoteric/spiritual understanding of nature and the universe – sometimes referred to as the 'perennial philosophy'. See Inayatullah and Gidley, 2000.

²⁶ 'Hegemonic' - culturally dominant.

²⁷ Steiner 1964; Dewey 1972.

²⁸ 'Cartesian' – derived from the philosophical position of Rene Descartes, 'I think, therefore I am'.

²⁹ Campbell, 1968.

³⁰ Broudy, 1987.

³¹ Gidley, 1997.

³² Gidley, 1998.

³³ Gidley, forthcoming.

³⁴ 'Ontology' – a philosophy of the nature of being, or a way of being.

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