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## Cultural Diversity Inspiring International and Urban Education

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## Cultural Diversity Inspiring International and Urban Education

**Abstract.** This actual description of world wide educational reform programs deals with rapidly changing local and regional situations causing tremendous controversies as a result of rapidly growing diversity. In this context we describe possible solutions for reforming processes of educational systems and to introduce new conceptions of international and urban education: By inventing innovative approaches, e. g. of incorporating international communication and cooperation that emphasize problem-solving activities on all educational levels. In conclusion we are proclaiming: In the context of international and urban education we try to help teachers and learners on all levels to understand and solve their cultural, religious, social, economical, and other controversies – in the long run of a globalizing diversity.

Among other functions, these problems have already been central obligations of our research group „Migration and Intercultural Communication“ (Mikom) founded in 2001 by both of us at the Rhein-Ruhr-Institut für Sozialforschung und Politikberatung (RISP) attached to the University Duisburg-Essen. Manfred Bayer has already referred to these problems during the European Conference on Education and Research (ECER 2011) at the Free University Berlin during his lecture on „Diversity and Urban Education“.

### 1. Introduction

Recent International and Urban Education reform programs have been caused by various antagonistic attitudes, outlooks and changes for many reasons: These reform programs have been deeply influenced by rapidly changing cultural, religious, social, and economical backgrounds causing tremendous urban controversies in our present process of globalization.

For solving these contrasting ways of life and convictions we have permanently to develop specifically future oriented educational programs that really achieve incentive measures for an ongoing *process of democratization and of essential socio-cultural equalization of opportunities for all urban residents!*

### 2. Diversity

If you want to give a realistic interpretation of it you will find a broad variety of its actual meanings: You have the choice of interpretation between

- Verschiedenheit / differentness,
- Mannigfaltigkeit / multiplicity,
- Ungleichheit / disparity,
- Pluralität / plurality.

All these concepts express typical situations of urbanization that may differ from smaller towns to bigger cities all over Europe. In order to define the real meaning of “diversity” especially within the EU in our present time we have to consider the consequences of various processes of migration after the Second World War as well as *the recent process of urbanization as a result from open borders, for instance in the European Community*.

From the philosophic as well as from socio-cultural points of view we prefer Hannah ARENDT’S (1989) *interpretation of diversity*. She describes it as “plurality and natality”, i.e. as basic principles of human life.

Hannah Arendt had developed a detailed description of *plurality* not as an arrangement any way you like but as positive differences of personal opinions where the individual dissenting (in German: *Meinungsverschiedenheit*) of all strangers has to be understood as the real condition of *everybody’s right of developing dissentient convictions and his or her individual uniqueness*.

This kind of an *inter-subjective conviction* and the emerging category of human relations are the basic determination of our “something in between” behaviour in the thought pattern of her philosophy.

This talent of subjective imagination can also turn up again in the procedures of Community Organizing: They bring into focus cooperative actions in the context of taking the initiative of one’s own accord. This kind of Community Organizing is aiming at developing public relations in order to stabilize individual ways of life: This is why we support Hannah Arendt’s convincing arguments that all persons shall have to be able to act and to live with each other under equal conditions as the result of *urban education and internationally based learning*.

### 3. Diversity and International Education

As an early dimension of international education was already the focus on each learner presenting a single partner of a specific community of learners from quite different national and socio-cultural backgrounds. But in addition to it, most learners are now engaged in collaborative initiatives with fellow members from different cultural backgrounds, educational systems, and ways of living in their actual community. This is an important reason for *developing new concepts of international education*:

“In addition to the acquisition of knowledge about other countries, learners also acquire and develop the social and cultural skills and understanding needed for living in a diverse society.” (MCMAHON 2011: 4)

This reforming process of our educational systems for a world wide promotion of diversity as a new approach embedded in international education by *promoting inclusive attitudes and behaviours* has also been described by GOMES / BULI-HOLMBERG (2010: 411):

“Exposure to new and different cultures, and gaining an understanding of diversity in an international context, helps learners understand cultural difference in their local context. It helps them develop an understanding of cultural and social norms and an appreciation of linguistic difference so that they can become equipped to live and work in a culturally diverse world.”

Thus, teaching and learning for a better understanding of diversity become some of the significant learning strategies of international education in a wider sense:

“Such learning strategies are relevant not only in an international context: Understanding of the local community is also essential for teachers, particularly where such communities are heterogeneous and diverse but can equally be of value in more homogenous communities.” (McMAHON 2011: 69)

It seems to us that we really need such convincing interpretations for developing future perspectives of cross- and transcultural education in a world wide context as well as in our urban areas. This task has also been described as necessary activities being developed in all educational processes themselves all over the world:

“In such circumstances, education / school can be seen as reflecting the multilayered and multidimensional dynamics that characterise human beings and human societies today, while taking into account migration, globalisation, economics, inequalities, etc.; they are reflected in the diversity we find in classrooms, among teachers and in schools.” (GOMES / BULI-HOLMBERG 2010: 411)

This is pointing out that diversity also needs to be analysed within educational activities on all levels: Promoting and stabilising diversity in and through education is the objective of each community, considering this task of education as one of the most urgent duties in our uncertain situation of representing human life now and in the future.

A highly encouraging project for diversity inspiring international and urban education by learning in the framework of Urban and International Education in our hometown Duisburg was recently presented as *A Guide through European Ideas: Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, and Paris*. This project has been invented and carried out by our own German research group Mikom (Migration and Intercultural Communication / RISP-Institute at the University of Duisburg-Essen) during recent years. The overall goals of this project were to invite young people at the age between 14 and 25 years who were living in the Ruhr Cities of North Rhine-Westphalia in order to confront them with:

1. The diversity of European values being created from religious, philosophical, political, and social ideas from Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, Paris and now implemented by the Charta of the EU.

2. The participation in an island-game called “Islands in Europe” where they get to know the diversity of values on their urban path through daily life.
3. The spiritual scales of values of their fellow citizens with whom they have to find common draft regulations for living together on an equal basis as free members of their society.

The main goal of the *Guide through European Ideas and Values* is to start young people reflect on pros and cons of different kinds of belief as well as different secular world views and value orientations. And moreover, make them communicate among each other as well as with people of public merits and acknowledgement being active in the spheres of labour, politics, religion and culture. This should produce a platform to discuss the meaning of secular life and belief for the cross-cultural and inter-religious life in the community.

We want them to get into talks about benefits and insufficiencies of their concrete beliefs and their consciousness of themselves, their fellow men, society and nature as well as corresponding value orientation, be they of primarily religious or secular alignment. There will be no whatsoever urge towards either religious or atheist confession. At any time, our curriculum will allow them any kind of conversation of general, playful and impersonal – meaning neutral – manner regarding diverse self images, conceptions of society and value orientation. What we really intend to do is to produce discussions among believers and those young people who assess themselves as rather non-religious or critical towards religion based on concepts of autonomy, ‘physionomy’, ‘socioeconomy’ or in ethnocentric and naturalistic ways. Our gathering intends to make a growing number of young people to contribute their growing consciousness of these matters in different approaches.

One of the most promising aspects accompanying this given platform of exchange and discussion among either believers or non-believers of the above mentioned kinds is to offer the opportunity of growing out of collective stereotypes and dichotomous patterns of perception (such as ‘Germans’ versus ‘Turks’ or ‘Muslims’ versus ‘Christians’), which they have cultivated themselves for whatever reasons now and again, and equally learn to see themselves beyond such partiality and even prejudice as concrete human beings right within a multiplicity of secular value orientations and diversity of beliefs.

Europe’s attractiveness and integration ability is based on the notion of mutual completion as well as the limitation of the worldly and religious realm. This idea is to be experienced on the base of the young people’s lifeworld. Consequently:

- **Firstly**, our curriculum starts encouraging young people to contribute what they consider important or less important for their daily private, professional and social life.
- **Secondly**, via role-playing (‘Founding Islands’) they will be founding their own states and give themselves a constitution fed with their own values.
- **Thirdly**, they will start to discuss the cross-cultural pros and cons of their islands among each other as well as with people of public merits and acknowledgement being active in the spheres of labour, politics, religion and culture in their countries.
- **Fourthly**, they could compare their ‘islands’ with the constitution of their own society and the European Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Against the background of their own orientation and the discussions with persons of public life – the tensions between the plurality as well as the mutual completion and the limitation of the *fundamental rights within the European Union* can be realised as criteria and standards of cross-cultural life.

The results of our project were highly appreciated not only by the cooperating townships and the participants involved but also by the Federal Ministry of Germany supporting it.

#### 4. Urban Education Reforms in International Contexts

At first let us ask some provoking questions to be answered:

##### 1. What do we understand from now on by “urban and international education”?

Let us start with a stimulating remark:

Most of all urban educators are potential agents of social change, trying to bring about educational equity in achievement and access. For this purpose, they need to develop and refine communication, social and intellectual skills to help shape *a truly participatory and reliable democracy!*

Urban educators also need an innovative understanding of urban life conditions and structures. Last but not least, they need methods of defining innovative strategies to understand and solve the problems faced by school and community residents themselves.

##### 2. What are the dimensions and expectations of international educational reforms?

In this context, we should keep in mind three overlapping complexes of problems:

- The close relations between education and the socio-cultural contexts in the specific environmental areas.
- The main goals of international education and the analysis of the real conditions of causing diversity in each area.
- The actual conditions for a permanent reformation of all educational institutions.

On the other hand, all educators also have to define our daily problems from a global point of view: Our European vision of living in peace together after two disastrous wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century becomes a promising area of responsibility.

In the meantime our local educators, social workers, and teachers really have to

*Think globally and act locally!*

This was already the convincing conclusion of the “International Community Education Association” in the Dublin Conference in 1983 involving more than 30 nations successfully.

##### 3. What are the consequences of the ongoing process of diversity for a permanent reform of urban education?

Since the early 1990ies our European countries have begun to treat their cities more like catalysts:

As we know from the regular census, urban researchers distinguish our urban areas from rural areas in Europe by their higher population density as well as by their differences in the socio-cultural, economic, political and religious dimensions.

We also know from many investigations that we have to make a distinction between

- the *internal perspective* that is able to tell the floating difference spatial and socio-cultural order within each city;
- the *externalist perspective* describing cities as stable localities in the globalizing space of networks;
- the *interstitial perspective* attempting to reconcile these two perspectives with each other by understanding how the social, spatial, and temporal ordering of each city is influenced by global, national, and regional forces and how these trends influence them in turn.

In its wider sense, *urbanism* will also include multiple spaces and webs of relations influencing local subjects by economic, social and transcultural changes. In our view, communities should act everywhere to ensure that all learners in their schools receive the necessary support needed to meet high academic standards. In addition to that central aim, we believe that a really effective community-centred education reform should be guided by the following efforts:

- Building enough capacity for radical reforms requires, but goes beyond the support for new schools, policies, and practices. It also entails revitalizing communities so that families and entire neighbourhoods can offer their individual supports children and youth need to achieve the full range of positive outcomes (e.g.: cultural, religious, emotional, social, and personal value orientations).
- Broad-based coalitions of communities are formed not just to increase participation in the work of education reforms, but also to engender a productive ecology for all strategies of reforms. Thus, the inclusion of underrepresented and disabled groups becomes a primary objective and not a secondary outcome.
- Enhancing the capacity of communities to accomplish their work involves an examination of fundamental issues of power, social structure, and cultural diversity that have traditionally undermined the efficacy of urban education reforms.
- Researchers as well as practitioners must acknowledge the interdisciplinary nature of international schooling and explore the intersections of teaching and learning, community engagement, youth development, economic revival, and democratic attitudes world wide.
- The specific needs of students, schools, and families are best understood and addressed when the local context is treated as a potential resource for innovative development rather than solely as a neutral or negative condition.
- Efforts to link the permanent reform of urban education, of the community engagement, and of the development that all schools have to be guided by research and evidence-based practices.



## 5. Complementary Out-Of-School Learning and International Perspectives

This approach would require educational systems and urban as well as international strategies:

- to expand the definition of student success to incorporate international connections that emphasize creativity and problem-solving inspirations, among other skills and dispositions;
- to use research-based knowledge to design and integrate new learning supports;
- to prozob. educators with new opportunities for improving in international cooperation and professional development.

It is a dominant assumption that school is the only place where and when young people / youths can learn successfully: *This assumption is wrong!*

Since many years – especially invented by the Anglo-Saxon model of “community education” – accumulating education research shows “out-of-school” or “complementary learning opportunities” are major predictors of children’s educational achievement, development, and cooperative learning. *The overall goal for the future reform of urban education in this context is the vision of a continuous international exchange with comprehensive and complementary education systems.* In other words: All children need this internationally connected urban learning system as soon as to succeed as well in school as in their global perspectives of life. The components of the system have this strengthening vision for all of them. *Complementary education* refers to the idea of a systematic border crossing approach integrating both school and out-of-school learning. This will meet the requirements for all children who need to succeed as well in school as in global perspectives of life.

This process of complementary learning starts in early childhood and continues through adolescence:

- We have to realize that pre-school programs set children on path to school readiness.
- Participation in after-school and summer learning programs affords children and youth access to crucial opportunities that prepare them for their later success in work life.
- Health supports are also necessary conditions for children’s being prepared to learn all the time.

It is also a highly important approach to support the role of families in learning processes. As a matter of fact, *many families lack the social and educational information necessary to know about valuable learning opportunities for their children.* Therefore a systematic approach to family involvement is one that helps a lot of families to understand the value of continuous learning of all age groups and offers a complex network of supports necessary for that learning.

Those approaches to implementing complementary learning should vary according to the needs of each community and country. The activities can be carried out within schools as well as in any suitable institutions based on a community organization with international connections. All procedures of complementary learning in this field need to be constructed and evaluated in close cooperation with as many educators, teachers, and researchers as needed.



Also on the regional level these programs have to be financially supported as international innovations for all age groups. Using its leadership role, each government in the European Union should encourage and support financially all these attempts of *out-of-school learning* which contributes to innovation in these areas for *coordinated education and accountability*. Thus it will be easy to get to a long-term strategy for achieving complementary learning activities and to *create these necessary reforms for urban and international education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*.

## 6. International Orientation in the framework of local diversity and urban education

Finally making up our mind for diversity stimulating urban and international education we may have to come back to Paulo FREIRE, the Brazilian educationalist (1921–1997): He had a significant influence on urban as well as on international education focussing on informal learning with a socio-critical perspective, especially in his later works: *Pedagogy of Hope* (1992) and *Teachers as Cultural Workers – Letters to Those Who Dare Teach* (1998).

Thinking ahead, Freire has anticipated the main problems in the field of diversity stimulating urban education globally. His main issues of improving urban education were e.g.: learning dialogues – conscientization – problem posing and solving in education.

These impulses had influenced *the development of informal education* to characterize the idea of a critical dialogue or conversation that maybe described now as *community based learning*. In other words: It was a long way from these issues to be described for now and the future in our phrase of:

*International oriented learning by doing it in the framework of local diversity and urban education*

In conclusion may we proclaim: We have to find out suitable ways and means for a permanent contact with international partnerships offering regular possibilities for installing cross-border exchanges for all educational institutions in our communities. The permanent process of implementing these models of international and urban education has to become a

*border-crossing movement not only among the European countries:  
Right now!*

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