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**Steering Committee for Education
CD-ED**

**THE NEW CHALLENGE
OF INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION:
RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND DIALOGUE IN EUROPE**

Project description

(2004 version)

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A new challenge

Diversity is a fundamental aspect of all societies that concerns differences between individuals and differences between groups. The existence of multiple identities, values, cultures and faiths within a society challenges individuals and groups to cultivate mutual understanding in order to engage in cooperative interaction and experience cultural enrichment. Without mutual understanding, differences may generate conflicts that, when managed with violence, lead to considerable violations of fundamental human rights.

Intercultural education, encompassing the themes of “inclusion and participation” and “learning to live together” provides a means of handling the challenges posed by multiculturalism in a context that promotes democratic standards for conflict resolution¹. However, religious differences as an aspect of multiculturalism continue to raise controversies and challenges in the areas of ensuring equality in education; facilitating inclusion in political, economic, and cultural dimensions of society; and creating a sense of shared citizenship. Specifically, the questions concerning religion in schools have illustrated the highly complex and sensitive nature of the issues involved and demonstrate the need for religious diversity to be addressed as a component of intercultural education.

Developing the ability to interact productively in a multicultural context is not intuitive but must be acquired, or learned. It is therefore imperative that the management of religious diversity within a democratic framework be included in the larger contexts of intercultural dialogue and education for democratic citizenship. Calling attention to the religious dimension of intercultural education will serve to foster a dialogue of common identities, cooperation, and peaceful conflict resolution.

Future possibilities

Several prospects encourage the development of a European approach:

- The religious dimension of intercultural education is linked to the political motivation of promoting intercultural dialogue as a means of strengthening democracy in Europe;

¹ Batelaan, Pieter. “Intercultural Education in the 21st century: learning to live together.”

- Allowing individual Europeans to participate in intercultural dialogue has assumed a central role in educational policies and practice.

The European Ministers of Education Declaration

From 10-12 November 2003 in Athens, Greece, the 21st session of the Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education adopted a declaration on "intercultural education in the new European context," acting on the 2002 decision of the Secretary General "to make intercultural and interfaith dialogue one of the major axes of the Council of Europe's development."

This declaration, in affirming "the diversity of our societies in terms of ethnicity, culture, languages, religions and education" and asserting awareness of the "disturbing persistence in our societies of xenophobic and racist practices, violence and intolerance," supported the resolution to "make the necessary arrangements to take intercultural education into account as an important component of our education policies" including "appropriate measures at the levels of curricula, school governance and teacher training."

Though "recognising the role of intercultural education and the major contribution of the Council of Europe in maintaining and developing the unity and diversity of our European societies," the Ministers nonetheless urged that the Council of Europe "attach a greater importance to education." The request was made that new strategies be embraced which "encourage member states to introduce the intercultural dimension in their education policies" and "identify models of good practice in the areas of democratic governance and quality assurance in schools and prepare their potential users to be able to make use of them."

It should be noted that the Ministers acknowledged the beginnings of the project *Intercultural education and the challenge of religious diversity and dialogue in Europe*, as it will contribute to the objective of seeking to "build understanding of the European dimension of education in the context of globalisation, by introducing respect for human rights and diversity, foundations for managing diversity, openness to other cultures, inter-religious dialogue and 'Euro-Arab' dialogue." The Ministers made the assessment that the launching of this project "will make a major contribution to the shared goals of mutual understanding, respect, and learning to live together."

The strategy of the European approach

The project's method is best described as "innovative in its theory, yet with a practical hands-on approach." With the goal of increasing *awareness* of the

necessity of including interfaith dialogue as an element of intercultural education, the project focuses on *analysis* of religion as a “cultural phenomenon” as well as *exchange of ideas and examples of good practice* among practitioners. Specifically, the challenge posed by the religious dimension to the policy and practice of intercultural education “requires revisiting and updating the concept of intercultural education in general.”

In doing so, several of the project’s outputs will guide decision-makers and practitioners as they address the religious dimension of intercultural education. *Recommendations* to governments and *policy reports* will clarify objectives and examine options for developing policy in the context of education. The compilation of *case studies* of activities that stimulate intercultural and interfaith dialogue will serve as a repertoire for practitioners as they consider the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches.

Implications for the major players

- Policymakers, from the European to local and regional levels, assume an essential role in linking educational policy to the broader issue of intercultural dialogue within a society. While policymakers must contend with such issues as equal participation and inclusion in the realms of politics, economics, and culture, it should be borne in mind that the project does not put into question the respective choice of each country to include or not include formal religious instruction in public schools.
- Educators and educational researchers are crucial in managing the religious dimension of school curriculum. Their role in examining the quality and efficiency of curricula places them in the foreground of connecting intercultural education with education for democratic citizenship.
- Teachers are evidently the project’s primary targets in stimulating intercultural and interfaith dialogue, as well as reaching out to parents and the surrounding community. Specifically, implications for teachers include the adoption of a “child-centred approach,” the improvement/exchange of teaching materials and strategies, and engaging in training for the religious dimension of intercultural education.

Action Areas

Measures are being taken to provide theoretical and practical channels for encouraging intercultural dialogue that involve “exchanging experience and developing shared approaches to a common challenge.”

1-Conference: policymakers and teachers are to gain a greater awareness of the religious dimension of intercultural education and consider new strategies of fostering intercultural and inter-religious dialogue. A précis and working documents will be published and disseminated following the Conference.

2-Compendium of Examples of Good Practice: the publication of the Compendium will offer a resource to teachers and teacher-training establishments in implementing new strategies concerning religious diversity. The examples of good practice presented in the Compendium will contribute to the development of not only the religious dimension of intercultural education, but also the broader themes of “inclusion and participation” and “learning to live together.”

3-Teacher training: training seminars are an essential tool for developing and implementing the most effective methods for managing diversity in the context of education. The seminars will offer a forum for identifying themes that may serve as objectives in intercultural programmes, assessing past activities, and formulating new methodology for applying intercultural approaches to both curricular and extra-curricular programmes.

4-Application of information technology

A- Publishing and distributing a CD-ROM

a- a CD-ROM will be published containing outlines of action objectives for intercultural education as well as information on issues of importance for members of the teaching profession

b- the CD-ROM will be distributed to teachers and teacher-training establishments in member states .

B- Launching a website

a- a website will provide a “virtual meeting place” for teachers and decision-makers, allowing for accessible exchange of ideas, methods, and examples of successful activities

o b- the website will be launched with the cooperation of outside institutions committed to promoting intercultural and inter-religious dialogue in education

Intercultural Education: Past and Present

Promoting intercultural dialogue represents one of the Council of Europe’s endeavours since the 1970’s. Initial projects emphasized the integration of minorities in an effort to ensure equality in education and encourage intercultural exchange within the broader community. The investigation of case studies and a symposium held in L’Aquila, Italy in May 1982 affirmed that while religion continues to play a vital role in influencing value systems across cultures, the

issue of religion as a “cultural fact” has been marginalized in the realm of education. Such findings encouraged the preparation of a comprehensive study on the “Education and Cultural Development of Migrants” and the proposal of action areas to combat xenophobia and promote diversity as a source of cultural and societal enrichment. The later undertaking of “Democracy, Minority Human Rights” from 1993-1997 called attention to diversity within the contexts of language, history, geography and religion while laying the cornerstones for integrating intercultural education with “civic education” and “education for democratic citizenship.”

European Potential

It should thus be noted that the Council of Europe has long embraced the area of education as a focal point for strengthening democracy, protecting human rights, and promoting unity among its member states. Its role of enhancing and developing education programmes has allowed the Council of Europe to gain experience and expertise in encouraging intercultural exchange within the framework of democratic principles.

In this respect, placing emphasis on the religious dimension of education does not represent a fresh issue to be undertaken, but rather a new challenge within an area that has already assumed significant priority for this Organisation. Linked to theme of “commonalities and differences between religion and other cultural forms,” the challenge of the religious dimension will also serve to strengthen discourse on sub-themes of “cultural diversity,” “multiple and evolving identities,” “the variety of religions and secular viewpoints,” and “the value and limits of dialogue.”

Intercultural Education and the Challenge of Religious Diversity and Dialogue in Europe, an innovative approach to dealing with the complexities of multiculturalism in an enlarged Europe, will stress tolerance, equality and ethics as core values promoted by the Council of Europe. The project represents a bridge from *multiculturalism*, “the natural state of society that cannot but be diverse,” and *interculturalism*, “the interactive dimension and the capacity of entities to build common projects, to assume shared responsibilities and to create common identities.”²

² Bîrzéa, César, “Learning Democracy: Education Policies within the Council of Europe.”