

Practical Difficulties for Education for International Understanding in Canada

Douglas Ray

Education for international understanding has been defined in various ways. This paper reflects the UNESCO view that it is the *attempt to develop a knowledge of the ways of other cultures, often associated with nations, and to develop an appreciation of the validity of loyalty to modes of life associated with them.* The word "tolerance," with its implied snobbishness, is not really appropriate. What we really want, is to show our students some of the ways in which society may be ordered, how each such system has its adherents and how it is not the business of any group to impose its standards upon others. Viewed in this way, education for international understanding is not competitive with the view that students should know and observe the norms of their own society.

Another aspect of education for international understanding is concern with the removal of inter-group tensions. The cause of inter-group tensions has been attributed to ignorance and prejudice which lead to actions that discriminate against particular language, religious, ethnic or other groups. In the process society is crippled by being deprived of potential contributions of its victimized members. Under these conditions, the persecuted individuals may very well display behaviour different from that of their persecutors, perhaps from ignorance, perhaps in self defence, or perhaps in subconscious fulfillment of stereotyped expectations. Such differences, even when recurring over several generations, do not prove that behaviour or attitudes are inherited. On the contrary, they are learned in similar manner by each of the generations which displays similar behaviour. Although particular knowledge, attitudes or

forms of behaviour may be more complex than others, they may be attained by any society that chooses to adopt them.¹ The educational implication of this interpretation is that intergroup tensions can be lessened by more and accurate knowledge about other groups in human society.

A number of difficulties to education for international understanding are discussed in this paper. They include lassitude in this field which permits many other educational problems to claim priority and various factors which prevent the potential of existing programs from being realized.

The Lethargic Legacy of Success

Not enough Canadians are convinced of the need for continued efforts in international education. Part of the reason is that they do not experience much intercultural friction in their own lives. They avoid it when they can. The inundation of immigrants from all parts of the world has declined to a mere trickle. The linguistic, religious and cultural differences of neighbours were obvious in the past, but passing generations have adopted increasingly similar ways. A society has evolved that is distinctively Canadian, a product of all the cultures brought by the immigrants, but distinguishable from any of its components, and also from its own characteristics of a few generations ago.

The declining significance of immigration and the crystallization of urban societies has given many communities a chance to assimilate their most recent newcomers, thereby ending the daily reminders of differences and the importance of understanding and appreciating them. For many Canadians outside the Province of Quebec, where the St. Leonard problem is a major news item and serious public concern, the topic is now academic and without practical significance.

The educational significance of this disinterest is that the homogeneous community schools which increasingly provide for Canadian children may not present much cultural variety. Local differences, like those of religion, are accepted calmly, so that Canadians might ponder whether their "mosaic" has been carried to a degree that creates ghetto misunderstandings. If passive acceptance of diversity is learned, Canada may stand in danger of

losing one of the most widely commended qualities of her traditions.

The second difficulty arises from the very success of past achievements. It is complacency. Canadians are proud that people from so many countries have come to live, work and win acceptance here. Most citizens are not personally concerned with evidence of remaining discrimination that occupies the attention of some scholars and statesmen. Most are convinced that the means to solve remaining problems are known and are being put into effect. A similar presumption, once widely held by Americans, has now lost much of its credibility.

Information, Economics, Politics, Social Class

Another difficulty preventing the best possible education for international understanding is the paucity of adequate, reliable information about other countries. Some material is glorified to encourage travel, some distorted to accommodate political, social or economic conventions of North America. Television, radio, films, newspapers, magazines and books all contribute to this process. Only information that is likely to command a mass viewing, listening or reading audience may be presented. It is extremely difficult to obtain commercial sponsors for departures from the conventional wisdom.

Economic pressures affect even the content of school textbooks. These masterpieces of the printer's art are sold at prices that require a very large market before printing costs can be recovered. Publishers must limit the content to items which will be generally acceptable in a country where different provinces not only have different political philosophies but also regional taboos. It is difficult for publishers to be too patriotic, but commentaries about other parts of the world are subject to various restraints. Praise for the achievements of another country may be considered as criticism of the Canadian counterpart. Pride in their scholarship protects most publishers from sins of commission, but selection inevitably results in omission. Unfortunately, education for international understanding is not a major factor in the editorial decisions.

The principal danger arising from this is that nothing is likely to challenge the orthodox view until the child has reached the university where serious scholarship will crowd out the platitudes.

But, not everyone goes to university; not everyone studies social organization while there; not everyone can displace deeply entrenched attitudes and prejudices. Control of textbooks is one means of controlling the content of education to reflect the kind of society desired. For example, the history textbook² commissioned for Alberta discusses the political and social reforms of nineteenth century Europe without mention of Karl Marx.

Control of the curriculum can lead to similar difficulties for education for international understanding. An economics course that does not provide for study of public ownership or co-operatives would provide little occasion to study the vast areas where these systems are widespread. Comparative religion courses may be limited to the faiths of the West or provide inadequate time or materials for a study of representative non-Western religions. The emphasis given to the United Nations and to similar ventures in the field of international co-operation determines how much children are likely to know about contemporary conditions in many parts of the world.

Social class has important effects upon education for international understanding. After establishing relatively narrow horizons for respectability, Canadian middle class teachers might well find it difficult to sympathize with quite different mores from other societies. One convenient example of the problem comes from marriage and sex relations. Here expectations are unrelenting: chastity before marriage and fidelity thereafter, with partners expected to be near their twentieth year before they contemplate marriage. How can these ideals be upheld while giving sympathetic consideration to quite different practices of some other societies: child marriages, adolescent cohabitation or promiscuity, wife-lending, polygamy and concubinage? Authorities tend to view with distress any instruction which might undermine the positive contributions of the schools to the strengthening of an institution which is already under stress from many sources.

The political factor presents another practical difficulty to education for international understanding. Influence is exercised through textbook selection and supervision of teachers. The controls will remain in some form because of the substantial amounts of public money involved, and because our traditions have established this pattern of controlling the human variables of education: the teachers.

Teachers themselves are subject to various degrees of political restriction. Although Canada has escaped the excesses of McCarthyism, exceptional cases suggest that political vendettas are possible, at least at the level of the school board, and that the government cannot be expected to overrule the local authorities, although it may well question the wisdom of their decisions.³ The ripples of the exceptional cases probably are of greater political significance, because more timorous teachers may avoid controversial topics entirely, thereby limiting the potential of education for international understanding.

References

1. Otto Klineberg, *The Human Dimension in International Relations*, Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964, pp. 29-31.
2. Bertha Lawrence, Louis C. Mix and C. Stanley Wilkie, *Our European Heritage*, Toronto: J. M. Dent, 1962.
3. *The Alberta Teachers' Association Magazine*, Edmonton, January 1965, pp. 6-7.