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The importance of intercultural understanding

Teaching is a calling and educators have come to this field because we care deeply about the lives of children and their future. Education has the power to change and enhance lives, and as educators we have a unique and powerful opportunity to help create the caring, compassionate and peaceful world we wish to see for children and future generations. I wholeheartedly believe that teaching and learning for intercultural understanding must become an integral part of practice in our schools in order to achieve this.

Why is intercultural understanding imperative?

We are living in extraordinary times. Many countries and communities around the world seem polarised in their views, and nationalist rallies and anti-racism protests seem to dominate the news, along with an increase in racial violence. Never in my lifetime has intercultural understanding seemed so imperative. We desperately need to rediscover our love and compassion for one another, and our respect for and belief in human rights and dignity for everyone. There seems to be a growing fear and intolerance of difference and diversity rather than an appreciation of the richness and benefits they can bring to our communities and lives. We are confronted with a range of local and global issues, including migration, climate change, water scarcity and sustainability, which require us to communicate and collaborate across cultures and borders. 'Intercultural understanding could not be a more important disposition and competence to develop in ourselves, in each other and in the children we teach' (Rader, 2015). As educators in international or national, public or private schools we are in a unique position to develop and nurture intercultural understanding in the children in our care.

What is intercultural understanding and how can it be developed?

The terms *intercultural understanding* and *intercultural competence* are often used interchangeably; I have chosen *intercultural understanding* as it suggests human connection and relationships between people. 'We develop *intercultural understanding* as we learn to value our own cultures, languages, beliefs, and personal histories, and those of others' (Rader, 2015). Intercultural understanding is a *disposition* and *competence* and includes: knowledge and understanding; beliefs, values and attitudes; intercultural, interpersonal and life skills; and engagement in positive action. 'Intercultural understanding is at the heart of global competence, global citizenship and international-mindedness, and what it means to be an informed, compassionate and engaged member of both our local and global community' (Rader, 2018).

Teaching and learning for intercultural understanding can be easily integrated into the existing curriculum in all schools worldwide.

Educators can build a school community that is inclusive of the languages and cultures of its members, create culturally responsive and reflective classrooms, and teach and learn for intercultural understanding. We can demonstrate our valuing of languages and cultures, and develop intercultural understanding best if it is:

- embedded in all we do
- addressed explicitly, directly and indirectly
- promoted with greater mindfulness and intentionality.

Developing intercultural understanding does not happen naturally.

International schools and schools with an international ethos have been at the forefront of developing intercultural understanding. The ethos of international education promotes respect for diversity, understanding between people, and responsibility for our local and global community. Colleagues and I have seen children, parents, caregivers and each other transformed through their experience of living and working together in the multicultural environment that international and national schools provide. The development of intercultural understanding is not guaranteed, however, and does not occur naturally.

I was very fortunate to participate in the 2014 conference of the Alliance for International Education (AIE), *Intercultural Understanding: Reflection, Responsibility and Action* in Mumbai. We explored the concept of intercultural understanding: what it is, our collective responsibility as educators and how it can be developed in our schools. Dr Kenneth Cushner, Professor Emeritus of Multicultural and International Education at Kent State University, and a keynote speaker at the conference, addressed the need to nurture intercultural competence, which includes intercultural understanding and skills, in young people. According to Dr Cushner language learning alone, cultural knowledge alone, and increased cultural contact alone are not enough to lead to intercultural competence. Intercultural competence and understanding does not occur naturally and therefore needs to be developed strategically, intentionally and mindfully as a process, beginning when children are young and their attitudes are forming. It takes time and is developmental. I agree. Intercultural understanding needs to be intentionally developed, modelled and practised in all schools.

Our international and multicultural communities do not always integrate and we often see members of the host national community, and the expatriate community living separately. When this happens not only do many children and adults feel isolated and alone; it is also a missed opportunity for rich cultural learning and understanding. In *Teaching and Learning for Intercultural Understanding: Engaging Young Hearts and Minds* (Rader, 2018) I discuss the need for integration, not assimilation, if all members of diverse communities to feel valued and thrive. I believe it is important to both retain our own cultures and languages, while embracing and respecting the cultures and languages where we live; and this can be achieved. Intercultural understanding needs to be intentionally developed for children and adults alike. In the Spring 2018 issue of *International School* magazine, Sally Hirsch wrote about the need for teachers themselves to develop intercultural competence in order to facilitate student learning, and teach effectively the diverse children in their schools through a culturally responsive curriculum. I completely agree. Likewise, I believe it is essential that teachers begin to develop intercultural understanding themselves in order to help their students begin to develop this disposition and competence.

Educators around the world recognise the need to develop intercultural understanding in their students, yet this often occurs primarily in foreign language classes as language and culture are inextricably linked. However, it cannot be left to the language teachers alone. All teachers have a shared responsibility to provide opportunities for children to learn about the similarities and differences between cultures, religions and beliefs, and to develop greater appreciation and respect for difference and diversity.

Conclusion

Educators, world leaders and business leaders recognise the need to develop intercultural understanding. There is now a greater focus on global citizenship education, character education and developing values in our schools. International organisations and schools alike recognise the need to develop global competence and measure its progress. In 2018, the OECD PISA assessment is for the first time testing for Global Competence, with the participation of many countries. I, like so many, am inspired by the voices and actions of young activists who are responding to the increasing gun violence in the United States or marching in Europe against racism. They are honouring our humanity, and communicating their views clearly and respectfully to effect positive change. Our hope is to nurture and develop young people like these who are engaged and respond to current issues. These are extraordinary times, and education is our greatest hope for a peaceful, just and sustainable future. It is educators and students, adults and children, working together that can transform our world for the greater good for us all. Together we must continue and increase the effort.

References

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