

EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Before the impending celebration of the International Conference on Education (ICE) – which is a world summit of Ministers of Education – its general secretary explains here her point of view about the type of training that should be given to young people and underlines the uncertainties with which decision makers are confronted, suggesting a different strategy to the usual normative beliefs in similar events.

By Cecilia Braslavsky (*)

During the last two weeks we have passionately followed several world events, such as post-war activities in Iraq and the Olympic games in Athens. Young people are actively engaged in both cases. In one of them, physical strife leads to brawling, rebellion and frequently death. In the other case, physical effort leads to defeat or victory, but the dispute is sportive and does not put their lives at risk. In both cases there are young individuals committed to values of peace, solidarity and cooperation. Many others, however, would show unacceptable traits.

The twentieth century has been the most lethal century in the history of humanity. In the last hundred years, over 150 million people have died at the hands of others, as was remarked at the 46th International Conference on Education (ICE) on the theme "Education for All for learning to live together", held in Geneva in September 2001.

This same century has also been the most promising one in terms of developments in the state of knowledge. But how can we ensure that such developments be used in the promotion of peace and prosperity of nations and in the improvement of the quality of life of people, thereby truly allowing for the survival of humanity? This seems to be the great challenge inherited by the 21st century.

In today's world, citizens, researchers and educators ask ourselves: How can young people be educated in order to achieve peace, prosperity and solidarity among all and for all in the 21st century? How can we answer the millions of youngsters who demand of us, - as, for example, an Irish adolescent we interviewed recently during the preparation for the 47th ICE put it - "educate us for life, rather than later, because we are all going through life without any direction!"?

It is a known fact that moral values and the basic skills for the development of people and societies are shaped in a decisive manner during adolescence and youth. Further to this stage, it is possible, and of course imperative, to boost practical skills, widen knowledge and further develop virtues. Such different personalities as the Chemistry and Peace Nobel Prizewinners, Linus Pauling, Joseph Goebbels and Bertold Brecht had already shown, in their final secondary examinations, clear indications of their future commitments to science, peace and war.

What is the secret of educating young people and teenagers in this dawning 21st century, so that they wish to and are able to participate under equal conditions in sustainable development, peace and the search for equity? How can we build up an education for young people that will overcome the limits of the old models, which were designed to select and train youngsters for a social and economic structure specific to the 20th century's industrialization period? How can we foster an education that prepares young people to face the challenges of a "globalization with a human face", as the world's situation urges us to do and the Director-General of UNESCO, Mr. Koïchiro Matsuura, tries to remind us at every

possible opportunity.

The Ministers of education of the whole world are challenged to lead the search for answers to these questions, in a permanent, open and frank dialogue among themselves, their societies and their counterparts from other fields of government. They will all meet in the 47th ICE session in Geneva from 8 to 11 September 2004, to discuss, to exchange their experiences, to learn and to propose ideas. They will be gathered also, and most importantly, to renew their commitment to action towards "Quality Education for All Young People" in the 21st century.

Millions of young boys and girls whose families have not gone through the modern education system are currently finishing primary education, sometimes very well, but sometimes with very low quality standards. In many African countries, for instance, the secondary education model developed in Europe in the 19th century based in the centralized State and divided in three orientations – arts, science and public management – has not yet been expanded. More than a problem, this can represent a unique opportunity.

How will countries respond to the demands of social inclusion of these millions of youngsters? Will they create and finance structures similar to the ones that are now being questioned in Europe for neither responding to today's economic needs, nor to a violence-free society nor to the social inclusion of all? Or will these countries perhaps create alternative routes of development, different from the ones created by Europe and North America? Will they be able to grow from within their own traditions, reinventing from others' experiences or will they waste their means by creating structures – obsolete secondary schools – unable to overcome the challenge of a new essential: quality education needed in a world of faster social mobility, with more accumulated knowledge and greater risks concerning development and peace?

Those thoughts are loaded with questions. Lack of certainty can be good if our goal aims at a fertile quest for possible answers. We sincerely hope that this occasion of the 47th ICE of UNESCO, which has enrolled more than 700 delegates enrolled – including over 90 Ministers of Education – will provide us with clues and opportunities to be shared in an open dialogue and to be translated into fruitful action.

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