

Addressing Intolerance and Extremism through Universal Values in Curricula



An initiative of UNESCO
International Bureau of Education (IBE),
a Global Center of Excellence in Curriculum



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



International Bureau
of Education

Global context and rationale

As the global movement of people, ideas, and cultures accelerates, as our encounters with diversity intensify, the world is experiencing not only the benefits of diversity but also backlash from those who have been indoctrinated into intolerance: a dangerous rise in violent extremism and in the violation of democratic principles.

¹ Institute for Economics and Peace (2015). *Global terrorism index*. Sydney: IEP.

² UNHCR (2015). *Global trends: Forced displacement in 2014. World at war*. Geneva: UNHCR.

³ World Bank (2011). *World development report 2011: Conflict, security and development*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

⁴ International Institute for Strategic Studies (2015). *Armed conflict survey 2015*. London: IISS.

⁵ Freedom House (2015). *Freedom in the world 2015*. Washington, DC: Freedom House.

The rise of intolerance, extremism, and even terrorism has been documented with tragic clarity in recent years. Globally, deaths caused by acts of terrorism increased by 80% between 2014 and 2015, the largest increase over the last 15 years.¹ At the beginning of 2015, nearly 60 million people worldwide had been displaced due to violence and violent conflict, including terrorism, the highest number since the end of the Second World War. One in every 122 people is now either a refugee, internally displaced, or seeking asylum.² Almost one in four, or 1.5 billion people, live in fragile and conflict-affected states or in countries with very high levels of criminal violence. 1.2 billion people currently face some form of violence or insecurity—roughly one fifth of the world’s population.³ Although the number of active wars has declined since 2008, the number of deaths has tripled due to a relentless intensification of violence.⁴ At the same time, the violation of democratic principles is also accelerating, despite claims that the process of democratization is becoming more robust. The number of countries with electoral democracies increased from 69 in 1989 to 125 in 2014, yet the violation of democratic values places democracy under greater threat than at any point in the last quarter century.⁵

Underlying intolerance is the tendency to reject others’ values and/or to impose values on one another. This tendency persists in spite of growing dialogue on diversity, gender equality, the global equity imperative, and the increasing ease of real and virtual communication in the 21st century. Cases of intolerance and related violence and extremism are often accompanied by discrimination by gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, culture, and race.

IBE- UNESCO's response

The global lexicon and dialogue on addressing intolerance, violence, and extremism have focused more on diversity than on similarities. While efforts to acknowledge and celebrate our differences are critical, they remain incomplete: we cannot fully appreciate our differences unless we recognize and embrace our common humanity. When education systems integrate our universal values in the curriculum and children learn to recognize cultural differences as diverse manifestations of our universal values and shared humanity, violent extremism is bound to reduce its appeal, and building more tolerant societies will become a practical possibility.

The IBE strongly believes that “there is more that holds us together than what separates us” (IBE Director Mmantsetsa Marope, at the *Countering Intolerance and Discrimination through Education: Challenges and Prospects* conference in Geneva, 16 June 2015). The IBE therefore seeks to use curricula to highlight the universality of values that hold humanity together. At the heart of this position lies an understanding of the remarkable diversity of our world, coupled with a keen appreciation of the shared humanity that unites us. Our working assumption is that acknowledging and even celebrating the universality of human values is the first step toward living together harmoniously and in unity.

The IBE’s response builds on UNESCO’s *raison d’être*, to promote international understanding, co-operation, peace, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It also builds on the third pillar of learning, underlined in the UNESCO’s Delors report: “learning to live together”.⁶ The IBE’s response affirms that learning to live together begins with a “qualified universalism of human values”, a stance that acknowledges the dominance of shared human values, tempered with the contextual particularity of some values.

⁶ Delors, J. et al. (1996). *Learning: The treasure within*. Paris: UNESCO.



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Cameroon. Lolo refugees' site. Children start playing again after weeks or months of a terrible journey in the bush to escape violence in CAR.

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Why use the curriculum?

Education is central to any efforts to effectively address the issues of intolerance and extremism. Promoting equitable, inclusive, and quality education is “the way to disarm the processes that may lead to violent extremism, by undermining prejudice, by fighting ignorance and indifference” (UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova, at the 18th Commonwealth Lecture in London, 25 February 2016).

This process requires concerted action at all levels, from local to national, regional to global, and involves engaging youth in strengthening the narrative of a single humanity and empowering them as agents of change. Mainstreaming universal values in curricula is the first operational instrument through which education systems can address intolerance, violence, and extremism.

As the UNESCO Constitution recognizes, “it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed”.⁷ Curricula can shape minds in a profound manner. Curricula not only inculcate knowledge and skills, they can also transform dispositions, attitudes, and behaviors by inculcating desired values. In any human society, formal and informal curricula are powerful tools for social transformation, and key enablers of learners to become agents of change.

As its contribution to the UN Secretary-General’s call to all to contribute to the prevention of violence and extremism (PVE), the IBE has launched an initiative entitled: *Prevention of Violence and Extremism through Universal Values in Curricula*.

What are universal values?

Across various definitions, “values” are viewed as standards that apply to beliefs and actions, with implications for the well-being of the individual, especially in regard to relations with others. There is widespread agreement on five features of the conceptual definition of values. A value is a (1) belief (2) pertaining to desirable end states or modes of conduct, that (3) transcends specific situations, (4) guides selection or evaluation of behavior, people, and events, and (5) is ordered by importance relative to other values to form a system of values priorities.⁸

The term “universal values” refers to values that are—or ought to be—common to all people, regardless of time, location, personal characteristics, and background. Another way of viewing universal values, then, is that they are “common values”. Common values are certainly not absolute, but they manifest with minor variations across cultures.

What is qualified universality of values?

The IBE proposes a hybrid approach that is both philosophically based and educationally pragmatic in recognizing the universality as well as the particularities of values. This hybrid position may be referred to as “qualified universality”.

While acknowledging different interpretations, tensions, and assumptions that confront the notion of “universal values”, the IBE maintains that a hybrid approach of “qualified universality” is possible, based on philosophical and socio-psychological arguments about common values across cultures. This qualified universality embraces cultural plurality, while recognizing that common values are paramount.

What are particularistic values?

Not surprisingly, values can also differ, along the lines of culture, gender, age, ethnicity, religious denomination, education, income, and so on. Particularistic values apply to distinctive categories of people. Such values reinforce a sense of belonging among people who share particular characteristics, including race or ethnicity, for example, gender, age, religion, occupation, lifestyle preferences, family status, and residential location.⁹

Insufficient awareness of cultural variety and particularity can generate divisions over the legitimacy of other values. For instance, tensions and even clashes may appear between values developed or advocated through the intended curriculum (including content and teaching and learning processes) and the socializing effects of the “hidden curriculum” (including classroom climate, relationships within the school, opportunities for participation, and other noncurricular features of the classroom and school that influence learners’ values, attitudes, and behaviors).

Negotiating qualified universality into a reality

Diversity, pluralism, and personal freedom are not incompatible with the recognition of universal values. On the contrary, universal values are actually required if we are to protect diversity, pluralism, and freedom, “treating each human being as an agent and an end”.¹⁰

The IBE argues for ongoing, dynamic processes of deliberation on how such qualified universality can take place at multiple levels of education and learning—e.g., from national curriculum to schools, from formal to informal curricula, etc.—as well as in cross-national forums such as those that the IBE and UNESCO, more generally, facilitate.

One way to address these concerns together is to generate a list of universal values that is sufficiently flexible to enable us to do justice to our diversity. As our understanding of qualified universality continues to evolve, it would be unwise to be sidetracked for too long by theoretical debates about the existence of universal values. Rather, we should move forward with deliberative processes that identify common values across cultures, as well as their variations, mindful of the protection of particularities underpinned by the human rights standards.

⁸ Schwartz, S. H. (1994). Are there universal aspects in the structure and contents of human values? *Journal of Social Issues*, 50(4): 19–45.

⁹ Blau, P. (1964). *Exchange and power in social life*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

¹⁰ Nussbaum, M. (1999). *In defense of universal values*. Occasional Paper Series: Women and Human Development. The Fifth Annual Hesburgh Lectures on Ethics and Public Policy, University of Notre Dame.

Preventing violence and extremism (PVE)

through universal values in curricula

Curricula are important avenues for the promotion of a hybrid approach that accommodates the universality and the particularity of values. They enable learners to reflect on their own understanding of the universality of some values, while developing their ability to examine related issues, leading them to be more socially conscious of the culture they are personally engaged in. They empower learners with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that are needed to forge more just and inclusive societies, capable of resolving existing and emerging global challenges; more importantly, capable of living together in harmony, mutual recognition, and mutual respect.

What features of curriculum might contribute positively to reductions in intolerance and extremism? This is a critical question that the IBE is deeply engaged with. Curriculum can equip learners of all ages with those values, knowledge, and skills that are based on and instill respect for human rights and social justice, and that empower learners to be responsible global citizens.

The IBE's work on universal values is closely connected to fostering global citizenship—a priority area outlined in the UN Secretary-General's Global Education First Initiative (GEFI), launched in 2012: “Education must fully assume its central role in helping people to forge more just, peaceful, tolerant and inclusive societies. It must give people the understanding, skills and values they need to cooperate in resolving the interconnected challenges of the 21st century”.

The IBE's work is also naturally connected to UNESCO's Global Citizenship Education (GCED) initiative, one of

UNESCO's strategic areas of work, a target of the global education 2030 agenda, and underlined in the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.7: “By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development”.

The GCED, which aims to build values, soft skills, and attitudes among learners to promote social transformation and facilitate international cooperation, can serve as a framework to operationalize universal values, and to directly engage with many of the related issues, such as social justice, human rights, inclusion, diversity, gender equality, environmental sustainability, etc.

Implementation arrangements

An ideal adaptation strategy is fairly comprehensive and includes a mix of outputs, as highlighted here and in the Roadmap below.

It is important to stress that the IBE does not intend to introduce a new subject into already crowded curricula. Instead, the IBE considers various ways of mainstreaming universal values into host subjects, learning areas, and concepts that are already in existing curricula. The IBE will also analyze existing curricula for any contradictions with adopted universal values and support Member States to institute required revisions. Equally important will be reforms to teacher training curricula to empower teachers to effectively support learner acquisition and practice of universal values. National and international assessments will also be adjusted to reflect adopted universal values across diverse modalities.

In this vein, the IBE will design curriculum prototypes, to demonstrate the mainstreaming of universal values into formal and informal curricula. These prototypes will be provided as reference points that Member States can use to design their own context-responsive mainstreaming of universal values. Guidelines will be provided on how to resolve situations where particularistic values may clash with adopted universal values.

The IBE will provide technical support and training to teachers and assessors, to ensure they have the right tools in order to teach and respectively assess tolerance and mutual understanding.

The IBE will also design specific programs for youth, in order to increase their capacity to recognize, prevent, and counter intolerance and extremism.

ROADMAP

2016

Articulating
list of universal
values

2017

Negotiating,
adopting, and endorsing
universal values

2018

Mainstreaming
universal values into
education systems

STRATEGIC Partners

The IBE is in the process of building strategic partnerships for this initiative, ensuring a wide representation of diverse stakeholders: Member States, academic and research institutions, international organizations, foundations, entrepreneurs, civil society organizations, and partner country governments

So far, the IBE's partners include:

Institute for Cultural Diplomacy

Berlin, Germany

UN Alliance of Civilizations

New York, USA

Aegis Trust

London, UK

Jacob Soetendorp Institute for Human Values

The Hague, The Netherlands

**King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre
for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID)**

Vienna, Austria

Respect Education Foundation

Amsterdam, The Netherlands

The IBE values the input and contribution of its partners.

Join the IBE in this important cause and help us spread this call further. Link to:

www.ibe.unesco.org

and share the call to action with your networks.

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