

## **SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ISSUES IN EDUCATION**

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### **Summary**

This article describes education as part of the social environments constructed by humanity to transfer culture from one generation to the next. Schooling is a formal aspect of this educational process, which in contemporary times is associated with modernization, and the accompanying phenomena of industrialization, urbanization, and demographic change. Schools reflect the culture and the status quo of the society's which they are in. They also reproduce the relations of power and privilege of dominant groups in society, while also providing a safety valve by offering various degrees of social mobility to the majority population. The literacy and modern knowledge fostered by formal schooling is seen as a vital aspect of modernization, development and growth, and a key in the elimination of economic unevenness among nations. The detrimental impact of modern civilization on the environment is recognized as a fundamental global issue facing humanity. While education alone is incapable of resolving global

environmental issues, it is an inescapable tool in the advancement of technological skills, literacy skills, and in the promotion of global understanding for a more sustainable future. In conclusion, the article suggests that rather than pursue the pressure for close ties and a single world view, loose coupling—the strengthening of weak ties through networks of mutual interest—and multicultural education are the directions to consider in advancing the concept of sustainability in the next millennium.

## **1. Introduction**

Human beings separate themselves from their natural condition by creating their own social and physical environments. The ecological relationship between human beings and the natural environment changes over time through human activity where survival and procreation require specialized habitats in response to climatic and other conditions such as the availability of food, water, and other resources. Accumulated knowledge on how to survive in specific contexts is organized over time as patterns of distinctive beliefs and behaviors that form a culture. This “blueprint for survival” must be handed down to future generations, and all human societies have developed mechanisms for this to take place. The survival of humanity inherently contributes to environmental changes however, which have both intended and unintended consequences. During the last half of the twentieth century the relationship between the sustainability of the natural environment and human survival and habitation has reached crisis proportions.

This article examines the sustainability crisis in terms of education as the transmission of culture and the role of schools as a primary organizing factor in modern and postmodern societies. The creation of systems of formal education is a major tool in the modernization process for developing countries. A distinction is made here between education and schooling. Education is the larger concept of the transmission of all forms of knowledge from birth to death which characterize all societies. Schooling refers to the formal transmission of specific knowledge called curriculum in a special place called a school where individuals in specialized roles exchange knowledge with a designated teacher, or teachers, and students. Knowledge acquisition is measured, evaluated, and compared according to established standards. The role of schools in modernization and in response to changing definitions of literacy is viewed in relation to the nation-state. Schooling can be organized, and is usually intended, to foster personal and social progress. Education systems are conservative institutions and are used for reproduction and social control which encourages conformity and dependence on established powers either within a society or nation or among societies and nations.

The objective is to explore ways to better understand the relationship between social forces and natural environments. Since most human beings are not educated to look beyond their immediate situation, people tend to experience nature, history, and society through the lens of biography and their own culture. The perspective which needs to be fostered for a more universal outlook is one that links personal problems to public issues on a global scale. There are two suppositions: first, individuals can take control over their own lives by becoming aware of the dynamics of their own positions within the social and natural order; secondly, by developing an awareness of all of those individuals in similar circumstances, progress can be made toward global understanding and tolerance as people learn to act in their common interests. This article concludes

with a discussion of schooling for the heterogeneous societies of the future where weak ties may be the bonds that foster the possibility of educating all peoples for citizenship in a human community of diverse, sustainable and co-existent cultures.

## **2. Education as the Transmission of Culture**

A culture is the worldview and way of life of a group of people. It encompasses their material world, including how they live, what they wear, their technologies, and all of the tangible objects and structures that define their community. It also includes the intangible aspects of the social and intellectual heritage of a people in their beliefs, values, and behaviors. A society is the organized interaction of people within a nation or as defined by some other boundary. A nation is a political entity established by a border that defines its territory. Cultures may cross over political boundaries or be fragmented and exist in multiple nation-states. There are approximately 190 independent nations and an estimated five to six thousand distinct cultures in the world. Clearly, nation-states are generally comprised of many cultures. Nations vary in their levels of tolerance and degrees of stability or instability that mark intercultural relations. Areas can be stabilized and destabilized as recent examples at the end of the twentieth century have shown in the Middle East, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, and Indonesia. Multicultural societies have been and are constantly being created by migrations and shifting demographics. Also, multicultural societies in the Americas, Australia, parts of Africa, and Asia were historically created by colonialism and western imperialism.

### **2.1 Human Ecology and the Organization of Culture**

Human ecology is the study of the relationship between individuals and social groups and their social environments. The original studies in the 1920s out of the Chicago Urban School of Sociology examined how patterns of behavior are produced as an adaptation to the particular environment of the city. It was then assumed that it is possible to adapt biological principles to the study of human interaction. This resulted in a relatively deterministic view of human societies as competitive rather than interactive. In the use of natural selection and survival of the fittest borrowed from social Darwinism, researchers not only assumed that progress was inevitable, but that dominant groups were legitimate in their ascendancy. This reinforced both Eurocentric and ahistorical views of culture. In the late twentieth century, however, a growing concern over the impact of human activities on the environment encouraged social and ecological movements as well as research. The social issues concerning the relationships among human populations and the environment were intertwined with the organization of human cultures and the transmission of those cultures. All human social units were said to have cultural contexts by which they defined the participant's beliefs, values, norms, biases and attitudes. Beliefs are what are considered to have the moral authority of truth for the group. Values are the cultural definition of standards of what is approved or disapproved. Norms are the patterns of behavior and preferred rules of interaction. Biases, or mores, are strong likes and dislikes that take on great social significance. Attitudes or folkways are predilections to like or dislike certain patterns of behavior. Cultural continuity then is regulated by mechanisms of social control that encourage conformity to normative values and behaviors through formal sanctions (laws and punishments) and informal sanctions of shame and guilt. Nonetheless, there are

differences between the ideal patterns that are mandated by the beliefs, values, and norms that are taught as ideal types in a society and the actual patterns of behavior. Even in societies with a great deal of ideological consensus individual members can display nonconforming behavior. This can be tolerated or rejected and conformity enforced by the overt punishment of offenders. Such displays reinforce basic cultural beliefs. This does not necessarily work, however, in societies with low initial consensus where behavioral conformity must be negotiated between parties that interpret mores and folkways differently.

For over ninety-nine percent of human existence the most stable form of cultural organization was tribal. The remaining 1 percent encompasses the entire domain of recorded history and so called civilization. A civilization is a society based on the organizational principals of civil laws. There are fundamental differences in the ways that complex and stratified societies were legally organized and how wealth was transferred prior to colonialism (1400-1800) and now. The legal systems of European and Asian societies are organized around property and property rights as the basic form of sustainable wealth and intergenerational transfer. To own or control property gives the individual, kingdom, or social strata the right to the products produced on the land. Inherited property ownership transfers the right to control the means of production, whether agricultural or industrial. Successful wars fought by nations acquire territory and thus increase the society's wealth by increasing resources, power, and the right to profit from production. In precolonial Africa, Australia, and the Americas, the land was held in common and thus was not a basis for personal or group accumulation of wealth. In order to control production, centralize, and accumulate wealth, the individuals or groups that ascended to power had to control labor as a resource. Labor could be acquired through hegemony or by force. The ownership and transfer of workforces, armies, and civil servants was a means to accumulate wealth in that to own the laborer was to own the products of the person's labor. Unpaid workers, slaves, were considered perpetual children in a kin relationship.

Europe invented wage labor for its own domestic market; however, while expanding territory through colonialism and Western imperialism, unfree labor was used. Europeans expanded systems of labor exploitation and globalized them using the principles of property rights. This demographic transformation and globalization of populations through forced labor from the 1400s through the 1800s decimated the African continent and changed the character and culture of the Americas. In addition, the dissemination of European culture and the Diaspora of African laborers into colonial economies not only transformed the existing subsistence patterns of aboriginal groups, but also devastated local ecosystems. Alfred W. Crosby (1986) refers to this as ecological imperialism. Crosby points out that Europeans carried diseases that eliminated indigenous peoples, and they introduced livestock and crops that endangered native flora and fauna. They promoted polices, such as the repetitive use of land for cash crops, that caused famines and destroyed ecosystems and natural resources, and promoted other catastrophes that could lead the way to global destruction. John Willinsky (1998) points out that the question we face now is how to use the lessons we have learned from European expansion and colonialism given that today's neocolonialism and transnationalization of science and technology follow similar patterns with considerable potential for destruction.

Cultural diversity rapidly decreased with the advent of colonialism, modernization, and industrialization as globalizing processes. Decolonization was followed by international economic expansion that continues without the political or military control of conquered territories. This has not necessarily resulted in peace or equity. In many regions of the world conflicts mark the unstable boundaries between contentious cultures. Nations with vested interests try to exert hegemonic or military control over territories where claims are made by more than one group. Cultures can also be lost through assimilation or accommodation as well as by direct forced intervention by a more powerful group. For a culture to survive it must defend its own geographic and cultural boundaries; and, more fundamentally, it must teach the distinctiveness of its culture to future generations. This can be done informally through life-long education as socialization, or it can be done formally through schooling. While education takes place everywhere, universal schooling is characteristic of modern nation-states. In addition to the esoteric transmission of a primary culture, there can be a simultaneous transmission of subcultures or broader and looser cultural outlooks, making it possible to consider the option of global cultural perspectives in a pluralistic world. Human beings inevitably experience multiple cultures with varying degrees of assimilation and accommodation. For example, it is surmised by R. Grove (1994) that the very pressures of colonialism - when Europeans came into contact with other cultures that were radically different and not as pragmatic, profit oriented, or exploitive of the land - gave rise to more conservationist views and even to the ecology movement.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Theresa Richardson** is an associate professor and chairperson in the Department of Educational Studies in Teachers College at Ball State University. Her areas of interest include the social and cultural history of education with a focus on issues of diversity and equity on a national and international scale. She has three books, the latest with E.V. Johannigmeier published in 2003 titled: *Race, Ethnicity, and What is Taught in School*. She has numerous chapters in books, articles in national and international journals, reviews, and presentations on the international role of large scale philanthropy on educational policy and practice, the development of the social sciences, and the history of childhood.