

Agents of social change in education

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Abstract The impact of the arrival of refugees and other immigrants in areas previously considered culturally homogeneous has influenced the school community. It has created an awareness of new needs and stimulated the development in both pre- and in-service teacher training. The ability to adapt to societal transitions is a skill to be developed in teachers. Rather than working for the socialization of students into the status quo, schools can educate students to be proactive agents of social change. Volunteer educators have participated in workgroup consultations to create appealing and realistic training that captures teachers' and student teachers' interests and enhances the creation of diversity-positive learning environments. A two-pronged approach is needed that promotes the world citizenship education of all students and meets the life long needs of immigrants.

Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom (Bahá'u'lláh, 1983, p. 259).¹

Many western European countries that traditionally have considered themselves culturally homogeneous states, such as Finland, are going through changes in population demographics (Johnson, 2003). The peripheral 'geographical cul de sac' position of Finland away from the Earth's main cross-roads created a relative dearth of diversity, which reduced Finns' exposure to variation in habits and customs. From the 1960s to the 1980s the 'foreign' population remained stable at 0.3% (Foreigners and International Migration, 2002).² Now, foreign-born schoolchildren, many of whom are refugees, represent 3% (Statistics Finland, 2003a) of their age group. Although the number is small, the relative jump has presented Finnish

1 Original c. 1880.

2 Data includes all 5 to 19-year-olds.

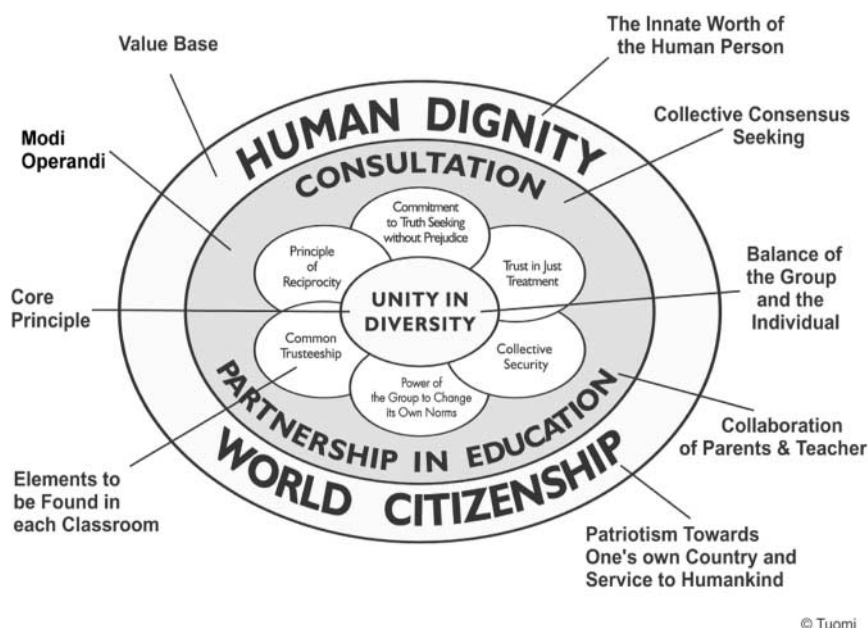


Figure 1 The human dignity paradigm

society with challenges requiring immediate adjustment by teachers and other school staff.

Human Dignity in the Learning Environment research promoting World Citizenship Education started in Finland in 1993 to investigate how to provide all children with tools to prevent problems in the classroom, deal with those that do occur, and lighten the load of the teacher by creating a milieu conducive to learning. A theory was developed (Figure 1), followed by a two-year action research study (centred on family evenings in the park), and conducted with school starters [Tuomi, 2004b (2001)]. The very same theory has also been tested in Lebanon (Ghosn, 2004). World Citizenship Education initiatives are timely for the new refugee population since they coincide with the dramatic demographic changes that are anticipated for the next 25 years in Finland when a large proportion of wage-earners will retire (Statistics Finland, 2003b).³ The Ministry of Education is now focusing attention and resources on the training of the 'foreign-born' (Opetusministeriön maahanmuuttopoliittiset linjaukset, 2003) because every individual is needed as a productive contributor in the workforce.

The impact of refugee arrival on the school community has triggered an awareness of new needs and stimulated the development of both pre- and

3 Population projection by sex and age group for 2003–2030.

in-service teacher training with influences not just within the school community but inevitably linked to the wider community beyond. The ability to adapt to societal transitions is a skill that needs to be developed in teachers. There is a key role for education in proactive navigation of the changes required with the arrival and settlement of refugees in Finland. Rather than working for socialization into the status quo, schools can foster proactive agents of social change.

Consultation,⁴ a non-adversarial form of synergic discussion for collective decision-making and problem-solving, was the instrument to set teacher goals and discern the means to achieve them. Volunteer teachers, 'the Consulters', were invited to participate in workgroup consultations to create an appealing and realistic training process to capture teachers' interests and enhance the creation of diversity-positive learning environments. It involved teachers from lower and upper primary schools,⁵ special education, a planner of teacher training, a retired teacher, and education students. All could start or stop participation at any time. Themed questions were sent to the Consulters, for response in writing and then consultation with volunteers and the researcher. Based on both responses, a list of conclusions, minutes of the meeting, were drawn up and approved or adjusted to reflect the consensus of the group.

If you knew then what you know now...

The first set of consultation themes centred on four issues: (1) what skills had the Consulters needed to acquire on their own because they had been missing from their teacher training, (2) how did they envision teacher training five to ten years into the future, (3) how did their needs and vision of future teacher training compare with current needs of in-service teachers, and (4) how should the learning required to meet these needs take place. The Consulters had much to say.

A consensus emerged around the following nine points, to be included in both pre-certification and in-service teacher training:

- 1 stronger skills in *observing* and making rational decisions in the classroom;
- 2 more on *educational philosophy/vision of a human being* so that teachers are able to evaluate various ways of teaching;
- 3 *many more alternative teaching methods* so that if one technique does not work the teacher has a variety of ways to present the material;

4 For more information on the model of consultation used, see Tuomi (2004b) (2001), pp. 67–71.

5 Throughout the article lower primary is defined as grades 1–6 and upper primary as grades 7–9.

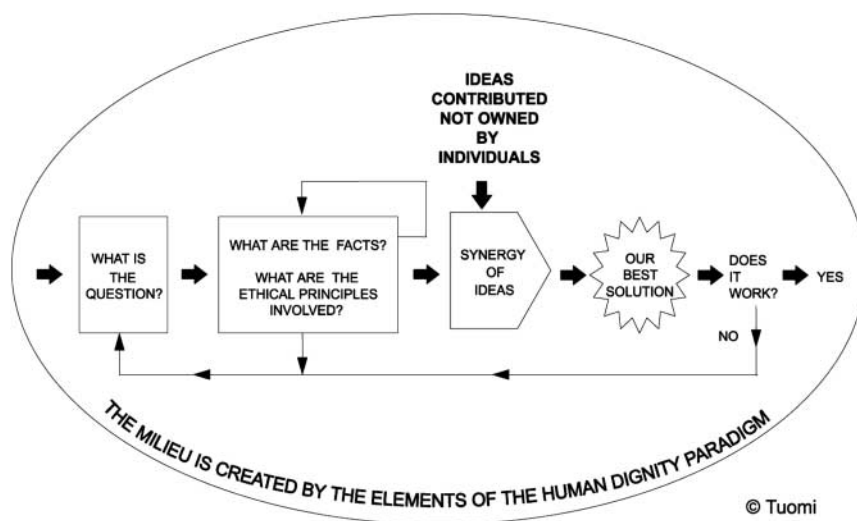


Figure 2 The flow of the consultation process

- 4 *more about the world in general and the major world cultures;*
- 5 *tailoring of the curriculum to suit varied skills and special situations;*
- 6 *the skill of teaching reading and writing to older students, including the differences between teaching Finnish to native and foreign-born students and teaching Finnish as a foreign language to those who are literate in their native language and those who are not;*
- 7 *skills in working with language interpreters;*
- 8 *more skills in working with parents;*
- 9 *the skill of how to collaborate with other teachers to create a culture of consultation at school.*

‘From a faceless immigrant to my own student . . . and on to world citizenship’⁶

The consultation process (Figure 2) was used by the contributors to organize and evaluate the first Teachers’ Skills Development Seminar⁷ (Figure 3). Training was conducted by teachers who had been involved in the education of refugee children. They brought the seminar participants into their classrooms and shared their teaching materials, many self-made. There was a feeling among the participants that ‘we are all in this together’ and the networking began. A web site, Teacher Development for Global Education,⁸ forming a part of the larger Finnish Peda.net Schoolnet

6 For more on this process see Tuomi (2004a).

7 For more on this process see Tuomi (2004a).

8 Maahanmuuttajalasten opetuksen kehittämisohjelma; <http://www.peda.net/veraja/opetustaidot>

Session I: Reception**Day 1: Diversity.**

Definitions, Finnish law and the education of immigrants. Rights and obligations. What can be expected from an immigrant child after attending a reception class? Lifelong learning – learning for life: Are we educating the children for a life in Finland or waiting for them to leave? Preparing the immigrant student to join a Finnish class.

Day 2: Unity in Diversity.

World Citizenship Education. How to prepare the class to welcome the immigrant student as an equal member: Diversity as a resource. Creating a diversity-positive classroom, a culture of consultation.

Session II: Education**Day 1: Teaching and Evaluation.**

What teaching methods to make learning situations more equal for all? Every teachers is also a Finnish language teacher: Using Easy-to-Read materials. Student evaluation: are we testing content knowledge, language skills or cultural awareness?

Day 2: Teaching Finnish Language and Literature and determining needs.

How does teaching Finnish as a native language differ from teaching as a second language? Differences when literate/illiterate in native language? Choosing suitable Finnish literature/literature from other cultures – cultural sensitivities. Is it possible to need special education in one language and not in another? How Finnish, native-language and special education teachers can collaborate.

Session III: Student Wellbeing**Day 1: Collaboration with the Refugee family. Developing a Culture of Consultation.**

Whole-school staff collaboration with parents. Values, religion, worldview; Working with interpreters. Tips for female staff working with families from cultures where women have little explicit authority. Preventative work with the police. Constructive discipline. Career planning: a realistic picture of the Finnish educational system, the job market and their child's career opportunities in Finland. Working with parents in crisis situations. Parents as a classroom resource; Hearing parents' voices.

Day 2: Student Wellbeing.

Understanding the world. of immigrant children. Values, religion, world view, right and wrong. How does the experience of being a refugee differ for parents, youth and children? Depression, isolation, lack of friends, hobbies. How to get peer group acceptance when there is no peer group? Realistic career planning. Diverse students as a school resource. Youth meeting Finnish culture. Involvement in organized crime; practical matters. Bilingualism, biculturalism ... world citizenship.

Figure 3 Teachers' skills development: from a faceless immigrant to my own student and on to world citizenship

site,⁹ was established to serve the dissemination of ideas, information and teaching materials for use in the education of refugee children, as well as of translations of essential school forms and documents. It functions as a

9 <http://peda.net> Peda.net is a research and development project coordinated by the Institute for Educational Research, Finland is in close cooperation with teachers and educational establishments in several languages.

resource base and a forum for the continued discussion between interested parties.

The human dignity paradigm to achieve a diversity-positive environment

The theory (see Figure 1) is underpinned by a worldview based on human dignity and world citizenship.¹⁰

Creating a diversity-positive milieu

Justice prevails. Justice is not the wielding of power for retribution but the sense of equity and fairness, safety and wellbeing for all. Consultation sets goals and means. The factors needed for creating such an environment include commitment to seeking truth, common trusteeship, the principle of reciprocity, trust in just treatment, the power of the group to establish and change its own norms, and collective security.

Consultation

The consultation seeks questions, facts, possible solutions, class goals and processes. It takes place in a milieu conducive to open and frank discussion where all participants feel accepted and respected. The processes are shown labelled in Figure 2.

Agents of social change for global education

All children in schools need the skills to function as proactive citizens in society. According to Izadi, the concept of 'world citizenship is no longer a mere expression of vague brotherhood; it has become a necessary aspect of learning to live as a competent inhabitant of the planet' (Izadi, 2003, p. 230). Consultation, by students, teachers, parents, all the stakeholders, on needs and how to address them, can be used as a successful tool. It enables the exchange of ideas, networking, and the beginning of a culture of consultation among participants. The teachers are able to involve themselves in the advancement of their profession by passing on their knowledge, not only to teachers already in the field but also to the student teachers of the future. Most importantly, a culture of consultation is initiated, which now needs to be nurtured among all staff and in interaction with all parents and students. The introduction of refugee students into Finnish society has initiated this process. So who and what are the

¹⁰ For more on the scientific basis of the concept of humankind see Tuomi (2004b) (2001), pp. 48–51.

‘agents of social change’? They are all around us: the new challenges we face, education itself, and the process of active consultation.

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