

# Education and Global Security

By Nayef Al-Rodhan

***Nayef Al-Rodhan argues for a globally inclusive educational program that promotes cultural security and understanding.***

There are all kinds of moral truths that see the world from different perspectives, and none of them have to necessarily be more right than the others. This underscores the significance of education: alongside family structure and cultural context, education has the capacity to influence every aspect of how we think about the world. It is crucial in our context of unprecedented globalization to put this powerful tool to use in the interest of tolerance and cultural understanding in ways that foster harmonious co-existence, and cultural synergies. When the fundamental importance of education becomes fully appreciated, it can be revitalized and adapted to encourage open-mindedness, inclusion and cooperation.

## **Educational Hurdles to Overcome**

It is worth pausing to consider the reasons for a lingering lack of emphasis on education. Its general importance has not, of course, been lost on intellectuals through the ages: **Plato made** a (rather infamous) strict educational regime fundamental to his Republic. Bentham and **Mill**, despite their differences, both recognized education as the most direct route to realizing the utilitarian goal of maximizing happiness for the greatest number of people. **John Dewey** argued at length that education is crucial to democracy. The notion of a global education that considers globalization, its impacts, its promises and its challenges as its main subject matter—remains seriously underdeveloped; there are two principle issues that should first be confronted. The first is a debilitating form of parochialism in which parties fails to see the value in learning the ways of the “other”. The second issue is a naïve conception of personhood, which fails to appreciate the all-encompassing influence of environment, including education, in the development of a human being.

From a purely theoretical point of view, a position that embodies these two issues is untenable. **As philosophers have remarked** for some time, the lack of external influence simply leaves a void needing to be filled by some sort of pure internal causation, perhaps of the sort Aristotle had in mind when he claimed that a stone that moves is moved by a stick, and in turn the stick is moved by a man. But what moves the man? This is a question oft-posed by contemporary thinkers and materialists in particular.

Theories of psychology, and neurochemistry as well as theories of mind and emotions have been especially interested in answering this question. My account of a predisposed **tabula rasa**—a “mind” equipped with a minimal suite of survival instincts demanded by natural selection and

otherwise open and liable to be determined by circumstances—harmonizes with contemporary neuroscientific research, and suggests that what motivates a human being is greatly dependent upon his or her experience and exposure. Neuroscience also informs us that **our knowledge** is mediated by neurochemistry and that it is not fixed or objective, but alterable and incomplete, shaped by both our interpretations and our environment. Thus, education plays a central role both in determining our social dispositions as well as in global affairs: it teaches us to uncover the many biases in our respective forms of knowledge, appreciate our own limitations and respect the ‘truths’ of others.

### **The Content of Education for a Globalized World**

The premise that we learn the most about ourselves by learning about others might sound like a platitude but the significance of the idea continues to be underappreciated and the concept remains under-applied. When students first encounters different mythologies not only do they come to understand others more thoroughly, but they also becomes capable of assessing the role that mythology—as well as dogma—has played in their own culture. Such multicultural study simultaneously creates the premises for more tolerant and self-critical attitude, while instilling a greater understanding of the ways that cultures have evolved. However, this outcome does not occur often enough because in order to assimilate mythology in this way, students should also be cautioned against the false but pervasive view of essentialism. A diverse cultural education must also emphasize intra-cultural variety, and the malleability of individual human beings when their cultural and social contexts shift. Such learning is enriching on another level as well: it teaches us that our histories are intertwined,. Furthermore, it shows that our ‘civilizations’ are not as separate as popular discourse would have us believe but rather that they developed through **constant mutual borrowings**. Most importantly, transcultural education reveals that human history is a cumulative effort, where no culture can claim monopoly over another but instead is indebted to others for their contributions. We need to move towards an educational paradigm that promotes an **‘ocean model of civilisation’**: a metaphor for human civilization conceived as a whole, like an ocean into which different rivers flow and add depth.

Perhaps most significantly of all, education must be updated to be more objective and to present information in a fair and balanced manner. As is well-known, education has too often been the venue for indoctrination in which half-truths or outright falsehoods are perpetuated. Familiar cases include the inferiority of the “other” manifested in the language used to characterize intercultural relations. More insidiously, and ubiquitously, facts relating to violent conflict have long been distorted or blatantly suppressed. For example, the Gulf of Tonkin incident involved deliberate deception regarding the presence of North Vietnamese boats and false claims that the NVM later initiated hostilities. While it is now a well-documented case, at the time the situation was less clear. The dissemination of this type of disinformation is widespread and badly skews our understanding of history.

Beyond such deception and mischaracterization with regard to specific episodes in history and international relations, education in its current form is woefully inadequate concerning certain types of information crucial to global coexistence. The general notion that many wars are just,

and perhaps that there is even a kind of nobility to many wars, is not sufficiently confronted. Were it more widely taught that the wars of the last 100 years have killed far **more civilians** than combatants—roughly three innocent bystanders for every two soldiers— justifications for war would be far fewer. Furthermore, the statistics of modern warfare show a **far worse ratio** of civilian to combatant deaths, in spite of all the advances in battlefield technology and bluster about “targeted drone strikes”. This is, of course, only one very specific example, but it demonstrates that education is the best means for altering people’s perspectives and in so doing challenge the many unjust features of the status quo.

More generally, education holds the key to greater empowerment of women and marginalized populations, and will be the principle weapon in the fight against global concerns such as poverty, injustice and inequality. Providing individuals with the requisite understanding of their place in our contemporary, globalized world and giving them the autonomy to have greater control over their own lives should figure high on our list of enshrined social and political rights.

Education has the capacity to both foster tolerance and a cooperative mentality essential to the future of humanity, as well as to build psychological barriers between peoples and reinforce divisive dogmas,. It is for this reason that it is of the utmost importance that education programs get the attention they deserve. As the rate of globalization accelerates, the de-emphasis of nationalist agendas and parochialism alongside the emphasis of mutual understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity will be crucial.

Sustainable security for humanity can only be achieved if education is made a priority by states and their societal institutions. These institutions include educational bodies, the media, the entertainment industry and political discourse. These electioneering sound bites are meant to unite and excite the electorate, and are thought of as temporary, but in fact they leave significant, lasting, and harmful negative attitudes in the minds of the electorate on various domestic and global issues.

### **The way forward**

An ideal **educational program** that protects the national identity and heritage of states while being globally inclusive and promoting cultural security and understanding should include the following eight features:

- Empowerment and development of inclusive national narratives
- Global knowledge of cultures and histories
- Cultural respect and understanding
- Communication, exchange and exposure
- Global citizenry through responsible media and political statements
- Global values and equality
- Avoidance of dehumanization of the other and abuse of knowledge
- Other moral truths and views.

Educational practice must be updated to track and promote current and emerging challenges. It is the single most powerful tool for pushing back against an always-looming state of nature, and for promoting a more just, secure, equitable, prosperous and sustainable global order.

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