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EXPERTS MEETING ON TEXTBOOKS AND LEARNING MATERIALS
UNESCO, PARIS, 12-13 DECEMBER, 2002

UNESCO convened a meeting of experts to assist in defining its policy with regard to the reform, revision and development of textbooks and learning materials, with a view towards more effective ways of fostering peace, human rights, mutual understanding and dialogue. Some sixty participants, including twenty experts in the field, as well as representatives of international and regional organizations attended the meeting.

Invitees included prestigious bodies such as The Council of Europe, International Bureau of Education (IBE), UNICEF, UNRWA, The World Bank, The Red Cross, Georg Eckert Institute, Adenauer Foundation, Euroclio and individuals from schools and departments of education from universities worldwide. Representatives attended from Brasil, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Israel, Ivory Coast, Japan, Jordan, Korea, Mexico, Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom and the United States of America.

Mr. Andre Marcus, Chairman of CMIP and Dr. Yohanan Manor, Vice-Chairman of CMIP attended the meeting.

SYNOPSIS OF PAPER PRESENTED BY CMIP

During the last five years CMIP has observed eight problems that are hindering UNESCO from achieving the objectives it has set itself.

1. An authoritative instrument of evaluation is absent.

UNESCO does not have any standardized mechanism at its disposal in order to evaluate curricula and school textbooks. Although it has laid down precise and judicious criteria, conforming to these criteria remains at the discretion of the member countries. Self-verification, however, is not the most efficient measure and can even be counter-productive.

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UNESCO has tried to offset this deficiency by calling in specialist institutes and/or researchers. These specialists, however, focus on certain aspects only and rarely address the components of educational material as a whole. This results in confusion, an assortment of viewpoints and seemingly contradictory comments¹. The outcome of this tortuous modus operandi is the absence of an unequivocal and authoritative yardstick by which to determine whether all these materials do or do not contribute to an education of quality, reconciliation and peace-building. Without such an instrument there is no hope of being able to intervene and bring about the necessary rectifications for school textbook and learning materials.

2. UNESCO's inability – for various reasons - to ensure that the most offensive material is removed.

An example of this appears in a Syrian school textbooks which calls for the elimination of the Jews:

"You have already learned of the attitude of the Jews who plotted to kill, loot and exterminate the Muslims [in the time of the Prophet] ... That is the characteristic of traitors and deceivers in any time and place. They make use of tolerance and gentleness as a hotbed and loophole for their crimes and sins... Therefore, the logic of genuine justice decrees against them one verdict the carrying out of which is unavoidable. Their criminal intention, should be turned against them by way of their elimination [isti'sal]." [Islamic Education, Grade 10, 98-99, pp. 115-116].

Have any steps been taken to ensure that this unacceptable passage was removed? The answer is no.

3. The implicit, the innuendo and the lacuna can be as prejudicial a tool as explicit stereotyping.

Detecting suggested and implicit stereotypes is not easy. The tendency is to overlook them and to minimize their effects. These effects, however, are no less injurious than explicit stereotypes. Not dealing with this problem head-on inevitably leads to the legitimization of their use, and gives rise to the impression that they are unimportant in the eyes of the international community.

The process of suggested stereotypes also manifests itself in the information that is absent or incomplete. By not referring to the other as a human being, as a people, as a religion is a denial of their existence.

What effect do the combination of demonization and dehumanization have on the intellectual development of the pupils? What messages does the child receive from de-legitimization and absence of information and how do these messages shape his perception of the other?

¹ See the conclusion of a comparative study carried out by CMIP on four researches regarding the Palestinian school textbooks, issued as our Newsletter, August 2002 or on www.edume.org .

4. Accepting excuses which depreciates the corrective role of education

- a) Expressions of hate and hostility are accepted because they “only” reflect historical events or are interpretations of the Koran or the Bible.
- b) Expressions of hostility and hate are a reaction to reality.
- c) Expressions of hate and hostility are a natural accompaniment to any process of nation building, like childhood illnesses that cannot be avoided and therefore must be accepted.

The question that must concern us is whether it is this model of rejection of the other that should inspire the building of a curriculum and its translation into textbooks and teachers’ guides. If the textbooks are not utilized to promote tolerance and respect then they become an integral part of the problem instead of being utilized as part of the solution.

5) The ineffectiveness of extra curricular programs

There is almost no chance that any of these programs will succeed in changing or even curbing the orientations of the official current curriculum. What is the practical value of non-compulsory, general programs on conflict resolution when, at the same time, the official curriculum does not address subjects such as negotiations, agreements and peace treaties in their textbooks?

6) The difficulty in finding an adequate framework for revision.

The achievements of bi-lateral committees are often heralded as a model to be emulated. However for this bilateral approach to succeed there must exist the will to address these issues and to solve them by consent.

An ad hoc formula centered on a country or a region receiving financial support from the international community should be avoided. A more promising solution would be to establish worldwide National Committees for Revision.

7) United Nations ideals are not being taught in schools

This is particularly true of those principles and norms which prohibit resorting to war, requiring from all the peoples and nations of the world to solve their conflicts and differences through negotiations, and calling upon them to establish a culture of peace.

8) The school is side-tracked from its primary role to protect and nurture the child

The basic mission of schools is to enable and help children to ensure their fundamental rights to “life and survival”, to the “blossoming of their personality”, and the “development of their gifts and aptitudes” (Convention relative aux Droits de l’Enfant, 1989). The school should remain a place that advocates life over death, the control of aggression, orientation of youthful energy towards constructiveness not towards destruction or self-destruction, balanced judgment over fanaticism.

Recommendation No. 1

Institute a standardized evaluation that can effectively measure the contribution of education to the promotion of a culture of peace. This universal evaluation should be applied to all member states of UNESCO, and not only to areas of conflict.

It should be based on the synthesis of the most relevant criteria suggested by UNESCO, the World Bank and other relevant institutions. This universal evaluation should be carried out under the auspices of UNESCO, or by a consortium of UN organizations respected for their professionalism and credibility (of course including UNESCO).

Recommendation No. 2

Establish a kind of ombudsman entitled to receive and deal with complaints regarding the most unacceptable material. This ombudsman would be authorized to both raise the case before the countries concerned and, if necessary, to demand the withdrawal of the offensive passage, and eventually be empowered to impose sanctions in case of refusal to comply.

Recommendation No. 3

Set up national committees for revision, whose role should be to reformulate and revise the official curriculum in order that they conform to the requirements of the universal evaluation .

The main function of the national committees for revision would be to ensure that there is a proper mechanism in place enabling the other or the others (minorities or foes) to present their point of view.

Recommendation No.4

Institute a world-wide survey on how UN ideals and principles are taught in the various national education systems.

Recommendation No. 5

Emphasize relentlessly that education at school must be for the good of the child, and the development of their personality, skills and talents.