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The Meaning and Challenges of Education in the 21st Century

L e c t u r e

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(A) The Challenges

The rapid process of globalization has created a new dynamic of socio-cultural development, which has resulted in a paradigm shift in terms of the underlying anthropology. We are dealing with a worldview where the human being is increasingly subjected to economic interests, without due consideration of his status as an individual (person). Some of the major challenges of education in today's global environment are directly related to this tendency of "objectivization" of the human being:

- (a) Economic interaction without geographical limits has brought about a new competitive situation for individual and society. One of the most far-reaching consequences of this development has been the *redefinition of education* as a tool to make the individual a "useful" participant in the global economy.¹ This instrumentalization – or commercialization – of a process that should help the individual not only to develop his practical skills but also to reach a fuller awareness of his existence, is not compatible with the humanistic ideal as defined in the classical Greek notion of *παιδεία*, nor with the holistic understanding of the human being as in the Asian tradition.
- (b) As a result of the largely unregulated economic competition – not only without limits in space and time, but also without moral boundaries –, the pressure on the individual to be economically successful – and to always achieve and *have* "more," or to "have" instead of "to be," to use Erich Fromm's phrase² – is constantly growing. The disintegration of the family in the "advanced" industrialized societies is one of the symptoms of this development; the effective collapse, or dysfunctionality, of the public school system in those countries is a direct consequence of this fragmentation process in society. Due to the lack of education in the family, antisocial behavior among the youth has reached dimensions which threaten the stability of Western society in particular. In the absence of moral authority, the only maxim seems to be personal success

¹ For a description of this general trend in an affirmative sense see Derrick L. Cogburn, "Globalization, Knowledge, Education and Training in the Information Age." Paper presented at UNESCO InfoEthics Conference, Monaco, October 1998, at www.unesco.org/webworld/infoethics_2/eng/papers/paper_23.htm, last visited on 23 September 2010.

² *To Have or to Be?* New York: Harper & Row, 1976.

or the pleasure of the moment. Due to the predominance of an economy that is built on greed, not on a commitment to the common good, there is no sense of purpose among those, individuals and institutions alike, who ought to shoulder the responsibility for education. The daily life is centered not on the advancement of society, but on personal advantage. In the countries of the so-called developed world, the “fun society” has phased out a polity where the individuals understand themselves as belonging to a *community* with a joint purpose. Under the idolizing slogan of “globalization,” we have in fact witnessed a degeneration of the “pursuit of happiness” into a kind of behavior that is typical of an anarchic society, with increasing lack of compassion and social responsibility. Herein lies the basic *moral challenge* of education in our era of globality.

- (c) The process of globalization has also strengthened the tendency, inherent in any economic model that is based on the philosophy of the unrestricted market, at “streamlining” individual behavior according to the needs of the day. Human labor becomes a commodity like any other; according to the underlying anthropological paradigm, education has to offer methods and techniques that allow a constant “readjustment” of the required skills of the workforce.³ In this context, the individual is not seen as center of a unique life-world (in the unfolding, or development, of which he or she will be assisted through the educational process), but as target of educational techniques that are applied for the sake of the economy. This appears to be the major *anthropological challenge* of education in the *neoliberal* framework of a globalized economy.
- (d) In juxtaposition to the trend towards standardization and uniformity, globalization has brought about a simultaneity of different life-worlds, which has not existed in earlier periods of history. Through the rapid development of information technology, not foreseen even half a century ago, cultures and civilizations that for centuries flourished and developed within their own realm are suddenly facing each other at the global level.

³ For a general analysis see, *inter alia*, Raja Mutthirulandi, *Globalization and Education: Need for Curriculum for Lifelong Learning Programs*. March 23, 2003, at www.boloji.com/analysis/068.htm, last visited on 23 September 2010.

Globalization has, in a sense, broken the boundaries of space and time, confronting each civilization with the question as to its identity vis-à-vis the others. Apart from the interaction between rival worldviews and possible mutual influence (a dynamic one may call the “encounter,” or “dialogue,” among civilizations),⁴ the neoliberal ideology inherent in Western globalization tends to expand its civilizational paradigm over the rest of the world, risking a “clash among civilizations.” The interaction and competition of different life-worlds under the conditions of globalization determine each individual’s and group’s quest for identity. Herein lies the “*civilizational challenge*” of education in the 21st century.

(B) The New Mission and Meaning of Education

The traditional understanding of education – as transfer of knowledge and skills to the next generation – is simply inadequate under the present circumstances. In view of the enormity of the changes brought about by globalization – especially in terms of the supremacy of the economy in the neoliberal understanding and of the tendency towards socio-cultural uniformity –, the question is not how to improve certain educational techniques so as to adapt the individual to the new environment, but how to ensure *humane* existence, and human self-awareness (self-realization), under the conditions of globalization. Instead of a mere *reactive* approach, the attitude in regard to the role of education in the 21st century must be *proactive*. This will obviously require the development of a new paradigm of education. In such a context, education will not merely be a tool for purposes determined by the ever-changing dynamics of the global economy, but also a remedy for the systemic problems of society resulting, to a considerable extent, from the primacy of the economy, or the anthropology of the *homo faber* (at the expense of a more comprehensive, or universal, understanding of the human being).

It is the concept of *lifelong integrated education* that may help us to tackle the educational challenges in our globalized world. More than four decades ago, UNESCO has described lifelong integrated education as enabling men and women “to be aware of their

⁴ For details see the author’s treatise: *Philosophical Foundations of Civilizational Dialogue: The Hermeneutics of Cultural Self-comprehension versus the Paradigm of Civilizational Conflict*. International Seminar on Civilizational Dialogue (3rd: 15-17 September 1997: Kuala Lumpur), BP171.5 ISCD. Kertas kerja persidangan / conference papers. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Library, 1997.

human dignity, to understand society and to take part in shaping it.”⁵ What is needed in the present context, is indeed an “integral conception of education”⁶ that goes beyond the mainly technical, or *functional*, approach of traditional doctrines (including those that are based on the assumption that our era’s “economic restructuring” requires an “educational restructuring”).⁷

Long before the present worldwide crisis unfolded, Mrs. Nomura has identified the basic elements and principles of global educational reform, which center on the idea of “lifelong integrated education.” She did particularly emphasize that education must be more than the transfer of knowledge, namely an effort, or process, that is *holistic* and *wisdom-oriented*, contributing to the creation of a new culture (in the sense of mankind’s universal approach towards the world). This proactive approach implies, in her understanding, the “self-education” of every person involved in education, whether formal or informal. Her conception of education is based on a genuine humanistic understanding, which rejects any form of reductionism and instrumentalization of the human being for purposes beyond the development of his/her humanity.⁸

Mrs. Nomura had originally outlined her vision of education in a response to the crisis of Japanese youth that resulted from the rapid economic changes of the 1960s. With her holistic approach, Mrs. Nomura was well ahead of the time. Today, we are faced with a similar, even more severe, moral and civilizational identity crisis at the global level. The common characteristic of both of these constellations, in the 1960s in Japan and at the beginning of the 21st century worldwide, lies in the primacy of all matters economic over other aspects of human self-realization. Apart from the educational challenge, the organization of the economy and the reshaping of society under the terms of neoliberal globalization have proven to be unsustainable by now.⁹ Today’s economic and financial crisis highlights the importance of Mrs. Nomura’s critique of an exclusively economic,

⁵ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *Records of the General Conference*, Fourteenth Session, Paris, 1966, Resolutions IV/7, p. 84.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ For this approach see, *inter alia*, Derrick L. Cogburn, op. cit., ch. 2.

⁸ For details see Yoshiko Nomura, *My Vision for Lifelong Integrated Education*. Nomura Center for Lifelong Integrated Education, at http://www.nomuracenter.or.jp/htm_eng/synopsis/e_syn_wish.htm, last visited on 23 September 2010. – For a comprehensive documentation of Mrs. Nomura’s thinking see: Yoshiko Nomura, *Lifelong Integrated Education as a Creator of the Future. Principles of Nomura Lifelong Integrated Education*, Oakhill (UK): Trentham Books. Vol. I: 1998 (reprint 2006), Vol. II.: 2002.

⁹ For details see the author’s essay: *The Collapse of Neoliberal Globalization and the Quest for a Just World Order*. Statement delivered at the international conference “Prague Dialogue on Europe in the XXI Century,” Prague, 14 May 2009. I.P.O. Online Papers, 2009, at www.i-p-o.org/Koechler-Globalization-World_Order-IPO-OP-2009.htm.

growth-oriented approach, which she succinctly expressed in her New Year addresses of 2002 and 2003, saying, “we must have a heart that ‘knows when it is enough’.”¹⁰

Against this background, “creating a new civilization on a global level,” to use Mrs. Nomura’s words,¹¹ will be the principal task of lifelong integrated education. The dysfunctionality of traditional education in the “advanced” industrialized societies, and the risks posed by exclusively profit-driven economic interaction at the global level, reducing the human being to the status of a target, or object, of economic interests, can only be tackled by means of a comprehensive and proactive approach. On the one hand, the dynamics of globalization require permanent learning that does away with ready-made, standardized models of education as a mere training of skills; on the other hand, the tendency towards uniformity of lifestyle, which is typical for today’s globalized society where individual behavior is continuously to be adapted to the requirements of the economy, highlights the necessity of integrative learning that makes us aware of our position within the totality of nature. The combination, and mutual reinforcement, of both aspects will not only make the individual more flexible and, thus, successful in a constantly changing environment but will bring about, for individual as well as society, a greater open-mindedness towards other life-worlds and perceptions of nature in other civilizations. In this sense, lifelong integrated education can become an effective antidote to the clash of civilizations, a dangerous, and partly paradoxical, affliction of our globalized society at the domestic as well as at the global level that increasingly threatens the viability of today’s multiculturalism and risks the disintegration of our political systems.

In an analysis of the implications of globalization for education, an African scholar aptly described the system of lifelong learning as “one of the indispensable assets” that will allow global society to bring to the fore “the concern for equality, equity and, indeed, human reasonableness,” and will enable the individual to fully participate in our globalized society.¹²

In view of its holistic approach – that is oriented toward wisdom and not mere technical knowledge –, integrating man and nature and favoring a better understanding of other civilizations, and due to its rejection of any form of instrumentalization of the

¹⁰ “Unchanging and Varying.” *From the New Year’s Speech*, January 8, 2003, Nomura Center for Lifelong Integrated Education, at www.nomuracenter.or.jp/htm_eng/ynomura/e_ynomura_essay_unchange.htm, last visited on 24 September 2010.

¹¹ *My Vision for Lifelong Integrated Education*, loc. cit.

¹² Akpovire Oduaran, “Globalization and Lifelong Education: Reflection on Some Challenges for Africa,” in: *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, Vol. 19, Issue 3 (May 2000), pp. 266-280; p. 266.

individual, lifelong integrated education represents genuine globality in the sense of *openness* of the mind and *universality* of our material undertakings. Unlike as suggested by the conventional doctrine of globalization – that makes education a function of the economic process, demanding of the “enterprise of education” a “quicker, cost-effective production of ‘global citizens’”¹³ –, the *true meaning* of education lies in the *self-realization* of the human being, a process that is universal and never ending.

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¹³ Raja Mutthirulandi, op. cit.