

Education's Role in Preparing Globally Competent Citizens: 12th Annual Conference of the Bulgarian Comparative Education Society, Nessebar, Bulgaria, 15 - 20 June 2014

Joining the Dots: An Overview of the Special International Roundtable on Higher Education, Lifelong Learning and Social Inclusion

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We live in a world that is inescapably connected. What we do in one place affects someone on the other side of the world—TeachUnicef.

The Higher Education, Lifelong Learning and Social Inclusion section of the X11 Bulgaria Comparative Education Society (BCES) Conference, 2014, brought together a variety of themed voices from across the continents. A 'global symbolism' of participants presented educational themes that discussed latent potential, achievable successes and challenging situations from an array of academic scenarios. This paper offers a synopsis of the main issues and matters that were raised in the different presentations. The authors have identified three main perspectives seemed to have emerged from the presentations.

Firstly, from an economically driven perspective, higher education and lifelong learning were viewed as potentially helping students to pinpoint and develop their skills and aptitudes. This was seen as an important action, especially when considering how vital two of the 'scapes' of globalisation, 'technoscape and finanscape' are, in relation to

how they contribute to the global flow of ideas and information (Hogan, 2010). It was expected that students' skills and aptitudes could be matched with market and partners' needs and job demands. To that end, concerned educators have been evaluating the efforts made via projects that tried to analyse needs, anticipate skills necessary for future employment and identify training provisions that should be developed. They have suggested that Further Education (FE), Higher Education (HE), and related Lifelong Learning (LL) curricula should include these endeavours in their aims and purposes. Alongside these, was a migration issue. It was proposed that, with regard to training provisions, respective government projects should be geared towards generating opportunities for students to return to their home countries so that students would be able to make meaningful contributions to their own national development programmes.

Secondly, human perspectives were focused on insofar as HE and LL have been perceived as being socially inclusive. The justification made for this assertion is that both HE and LL represent sites for the development of students' resilient skills, understood as the capacity to endure suffering and disappointments. On the other end of this spectrum, is students' capability to develop positive attitudes that are geared towards constructive personal and professional development. Both sets of students' capabilities result from their lived experiences. From this viewpoint, presentations pointed to the HE curriculum as a potential locus for the development of those skills. It was further suggested that philosophical and cultural approaches to learning could be discussed in articulation to this stance, with a view to providing students with nurturing environments conducive to their personal and professional growth (Milner, 2010; Colombo, 2004). A highly individualised and competitive atmosphere was not encouraged.

Thirdly, social inclusion provided by HE and LL was perceived as necessarily linked to a multicultural perspective that valued cultural diversity and challenged discrimination, identity essentialism and cultural purity. Presentations from that perspective stressed the view of HE as a "third space" in which the principles of internationalisation, regionalisation and localisation cohabit (George and Lewis, 2011). Additionally, presenters claimed that those views should help students to perceive HE and other educational institutions as multicultural organizations that celebrate cultural plurality. But, if cultural plurality is to flourish, it was suggested that curriculum should be perceived as a territory embedded with the understanding of the role of cultural variables both in human sciences and in technological areas.

It is interesting to note that from all the foregoing perspectives, there is a targeted focus on HE students. HE and LL in a social inclusion dimension were perceived as incorporating technical preparation for job market, as well as developing students' human and cultural competencies to deal with life's challenges, in and out of a given learning environment. Undoubtedly, the directed focus on students, who are consid-

ered the most important stakeholders in the ‘business of education’, was intended to alert the people who are charged with educating children, of the need to address students’ educational needs. It was also aimed at encouraging educators to conduct more research in HE and LL issues.

The discussions and arguments in this thematic section were presented from different angles and in manner that supported ‘an internationalization spirit’ (Henry, 2012). It was clear that students from around the globe faced and experienced the same and similar problems, albeit in different contexts and national circumstances. The content from the various themes granted participants the opportunity to examine these issues via a variety of lenses, thus ensuring that participants do not remain ‘educationally tunnel vision’. Participants were also encouraged to reflect on their own practice (Moore, 2007; Schon, 1991), critically analyse specific issues from different cultural contexts, although being left with more questions than answers. But this is instructive and should be praised, since it provides stepping stones to further inquiries and future research. In this way, new knowledge can be generated and possible solutions can be addressed, hence creating ‘new spaces’ for the understanding and embracing cultural diversity and social inclusion.

Generally, The Higher Education, Lifelong Learning and Social Inclusion section of the X11 Bulgaria Comparative Education Society (BCES) 2014 Conference was successful in that, it represented the ‘essence of educational principles’ by compelling participants to look inwardly, as well as critically at their actions as educators of tomorrow’s leaders – today’s students. In a strange and interesting way, Bloom’s Taxonomy of objectives manifested themselves in various aspects of the proceedings. As learner-participants, all present had numerous opportunities to demonstrate different skills, at as many levels, from the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains. In terms of reflective practice, this aspect can evidently be an additional area of research among participants, especially if HE and LL are to remain as crucial spheres of influence for social inclusion.

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