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Is education to learn to live together a choice or an ethical demand?

Educational systems around the globe have traditionally focused on preparing learners for a rather predictable job market. They have equipped many generations of children and young people with a set of skills in literacy and numeracy with the goal to build the knowledge necessary “to make a living”. This has meant that important aspects of education such as socio-emotional learning, interpersonal skills, ethics education, and abilities to comprehend and respond to the realities of the world and their communities, were left behind, or to families and religious communities. As globalization developed, education failed to equip learners with the necessary competencies to navigate a world that demands from them not only knowledge but also a strong sense of community, shared values and a moral compass.

Today children and youth live in an increasingly globalized world, where the potential for learning and collaboration around common issues of concern among peoples of different cultures and faiths is enormous; yet, we also live in a world that is increasingly in the grip of religious fundamentalism and extremism, negative stereotypes and fear of the other, violence and distrust; a world where children grow up without appreciation of the other, and where education systems tend to divide, fragmentize and immerse children into compartmentalized learning spaces, according to socio-economic class, religion, learning abilities and even gender, thus reinforcing the very factors that lead to divisions and fear of the other in societies at large.

Today education systems need to be reimagined and reinvented to respond to the multiple ethical challenges of societies, but also to the globalized nature of our daily interactions and lives. Education systems need to retrieve the very essence of the meaning of education, that aims to lead out, to help children to develop to their full potential, not just intellectually, but also emotionally, relationally and spiritually. It is not enough for schools to include subjects that help children develop skills for life; what is needed is a systems-wide approach that is grounded in an ethical perspective of society, where schools understand themselves as part of a community and as a key actor in fostering social cohesion and building peace; where the principles that guide education, not only content but also management, are sensitive to cultural and religious differences; where educational spaces are safe for children to strengthen their sense of belonging, inclusive identities, and allow them to become who they want to become, connect with others and transform themselves and the world around them. It is unacceptable and even unethical if, because of political interests, religious or cultural righteousness, or economic advantage, education systems shut themselves to welcome the other, recognize, and foster respect for diversity, or even to equip learners to live in solidarity with others.

Arigatou International, in collaboration with UNICEF and UNESCO, has developed in 2008 The Learning to Live Together - An Intercultural and Interfaith Programme for Ethics Education for children and young people. The programme is guided by an ethics education framework that will be presented as an example of how ethics can be mainstreamed in the principles of education systems, supporting the development of inclusive, pluralistic, safe and responsive learning environments.