Tracey Harjatanaya

Promoting Pluralism in and through Education: A Double-Edged Sword

Over the last decade, the world has witnessed an alarming number of reported violent and intolerant cases. The media worldwide has been bombarded with news about wars, attempts of terrorism acts, and rise of radicalisation – and education is often being held responsible for the occurrence of such incidence. Schools are not only expected to impart knowledge to young people, but they are also expected to instil values and develop skills that prepare the young citizens to live together in diversity and be resilient to change. Meanwhile, as the world becomes more competitive and academic credentials continues to be regarded golden tickets to secure employment and boost national economic development, educational missions and goals in practice can organically be reduced to serve a mere singular purpose. After all, if we scrutinise the aims and missions of education in most, if not all countries, the core narratives behind the allocation of a high proportion of national budget to fund education expenditures is for economic developmental purpose, in which education acts as an investment tool to increase human capital.

Considering the multiple demands on schools and the often-conflicting interests of different layers of stakeholders, how does education, especially educators do it all? Which one is taken priority? Should one be prioritised over the other? To what extent can schools meet all these expectations and what are the practical challenges faced by educators? What is the danger of not meeting these demands? Is the academically driven educational mission the most concerning issue when dealing with education for pluralism? Is it possible that education does more harm than simply maintaining status quo, and plays a part in exacerbating the problems?

This presentation aims to challenge the pre-conceived notion that education (or schooling) always does good, by highlighting the dual role education can and does play in both ameliorating and perpetuating inequalities and conflict. It specifically intends to call special attention to the ways 'hidden curriculum' take part in shaping the minds and attitudes of the students to normalise things that might be discriminatory and favour hegemonic culture. This is because despite being "culturally embedded", education, particularly formal education is "politically delivered", implicating that learners' educational experiences can be politicised (Brock, 2011:19). Consequently, schools – as hierarchical institutions – are not absent from power relations discourse and can be sites where inequalities reproduce. The presentation then discusses the importance of considering context-laden values and local traditions when responding to the social and cultural uncertainty. It then calls for the collaboration among, and engagement of, different stakeholders, from the central and local government to educators, parents and communities in discussing ways to respond to social justice, violence and intolerance, and thus together implementing systematic, holistic education that lays the values of humanity, pluralism and compassion as the foundation of all kinds of education – education that is beyond schooling.