

Towards Transformation: The Role of Educational Administrators in Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue within Institutions of Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper argues that challenges of education and cultures cannot be tackled by simply using new technologies, new manuals, new supports or a change in work methods or programs. Rather, the society needs authentic teachers; persons who, above all are convinced of our human capacity to advance along the path of truth while keeping their gaze fixed on Christ, whose face radiates the Truth which ethically enlightens. This paper therefore explores the spiritual and cultural crises in the modern institutions of higher education as a manifestation of globalization. These institutions have been considered by this paper as a hub of all cultures and religions hence their potential for societal transformation. No sector is more globalized than provision of education especially at higher level. The paper highlights the vital role of educational administrators in fostering interreligious and intercultural dialogues within the university setup. With the accelerated erosion of religious and cultural values, the paper also explores how education can restore and preserve these vital ingredients that characterize the entire human existence. The paper concludes that education enshrines culture and religion. It recommends that educational administrators should therefore lead members of their institutions towards facing the human, religious and cultural transformation and alterations in the world today with ethics and intelligence as their contribution towards the realization of societal transformation globally.

Key Words: Transformation, Interreligious, Intercultural, Dialogue, Administrator

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, intercultural themes, such as UNESCO's projects on intercultural and interreligious dialogue (UNESCO, 2010), have received special attention from governments and international organizations. The multi educational and cultural policies of the European Union and the Council of Europe, which, among other things extensively promote student exchanges between different cultures, cannot be overemphasized either. Such a scenario impels educational administrators to reflect on and interrogate themselves on the relationship between education, religion and culture. Education has the responsibility of transmitting awareness of the learner's own roots and supplying points of reference that would allow the position and definition of one's personal position in the world.

Thompson (1990) interrogates the definition of the UNESCO that education comprises —organized and sustained communication designed to bring about learning‡ (p.23). This implies that education should bring change in behaviour patterns as a result of having been exposed to some sort of knowledge, skills, values or ideals and attitudes. So, why should we propose that an educational administrator has a role to play in the transformation of the university students? He or she is the chief supervisor of what is going on in the campus and so has the duty to ensure that students are exposed to opportunities that would help them understand their cultural and religious diversity. It is imperative that the students are made to appreciate the differences in cultural values and practices brought about by globalization.

Education enterprise and practitioners are therefore called upon to provide the students within the institutions of higher learning with the necessary elements to develop an intercultural vision, which summons a real paradigm shift at the administrative and pedagogical levels. This will lead to envisioning of a common destiny required for the acquisition of attitudes of conviviality and cooperation through an itinerary of civilization to be travelled together. This paper proposes a search for ethical foundations that should characterize the common practices of educational administration and planning in higher institutions of education. It is argued that loss of students' identity in the multicultural university community could lead to fragmentation of transformation and conflict within the institutions of higher learning and wider society. This therefore requires that care is taken to ensure that the education that the

students go through enables them to appreciate the diverse cultural and religious values for coexistence at the universities and later in the society in which they belong.

DISCUSSION

Religion, Culture, Education and the Administrator

Religion can be described as a system of beliefs called to give an explanation to the universe, natural phenomena and our own existence. According to UNESCO (2009), people in all cultures have a set of beliefs that go beyond both the self and the natural world. Religious beliefs have a tough influence on the culture of a community and are central to culture and provide the moral codes by which people live. We use these beliefs to help explain reasons for human existence and to guide personal relationships and behaviour.

The fact that different people profess different faiths would imply that at times there may be some misunderstanding related to beliefs. Such a scenario can be counterchecked by interreligious dialogue. But what is religious dialogue? According to Mvumbi (n.d) interreligious dialogue is an attitude that someone acquires or the kinds of options open to him/her in developing his/her own point of view of other religions. Velez de Cea (2010) describes interreligious dialogue as —a method to better understand religions, specifically, insider's perspectives and the assumptions of interpreters! p.96. To him, this is an academic form of interreligious dialogue which involves three different kinds of conversation: interpersonal, intrapersonal, and critical comparative. The face to face dialogue involves meeting with representatives of other religious traditions, while inner dialogue deals with one's convictions and assumptions, and scholarly dialogue with textual sources from at least two hermeneutical or religious traditions.

The two definitions underscore the fact the conversation between the different perspectives of looking at a religion is imperative to the understanding of another religion for coexistence. It is therefore important that people at the institutions of higher education get this knowledge in order to work towards the transformation of their attitude to others and have an informed world view of confessions. As alluded earlier, religion and culture are intercalated thus it is important to distinguish the two.

A culture presents itself as a system of beliefs, values, habits, behaviours and objects which members of a society share in order to deal with the way they relate to the world and with one another (UNESCO, 2009). This implies that there are varied cultures depending on the number of people existing within a given setting, inclusive institutions of higher education. The description above presupposes intercultural dialogue. According to the Council of Europe (2007) as cited by Suciu, Ivanovici, Neagu, Protopopescu and Sirbu (2009, p.806) intercultural dialogue is —an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures that leads to a deeper understanding of the other's global perception. Given such a scenario students and staff are challenged to communicate to each other their codes, rules and practices that embody their respective culture for better understanding and appreciation. Consequently, there will be no one feeling that his/her culture is superior or inferior. It is the administrator who is tasked with the responsibility to ensure that people within the institution are in continuous dialogue as far as their culture and religious beliefs are concerned. The main purpose of doing this is to ensure that there is harmony so that all work towards the achievement of mission and objectives towards transformation.

Culture and religion are transmitted from generation to generation through learning which this paper designates by the term education. All the three have to do with the concept that every individual learner has of the world in which she/he lives. Therefore, education, culture and religion offer the learner the possibility to structure his/her identity not only in the confines of the institution of higher learning but in the wider society as well. According to Wardekker and Miedema (2011), there is a process of growing plurality of our society. It is to this effect that they assert that plurality is thought of in terms of multiplicity of cultures. The concept of many cultures in one particular place such as institutions of higher education requires that one is helped to live in harmony with others. It therefore makes it imperative to develop adequate ways of interacting with persons belonging to another culture and religion.

The students at the university experience a number of varied cultural and religious practices. This calls for dialogue between what each holds dear. For example, in a university setting, there are people of different confessions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, African religion to mention but a few. The administrator is there charged with the responsibility to create a forum for discussion where students regardless of the subjects they study, could interact and expose the differences and articulate how the differences are meant for enriching the society.

As asserted by Wardekker and Miedema (2011), the multiplicity for religious education implies that religion is seen by many as a core area where intercultural skills and attitudes like 'respect for others' may be shared or inculcated. This argument hence indicates that culture, religion and education are interrelated. Consequently, the education that is offered at the higher institutions of learning ought to highlight values that are considered valuable in the society regardless of ones origin.

In examining the value of unity in Africa, Bansikiza (2004) argues that people in Africa value unity and diversity, and respect for one another's religious and cultural practices. To him, unity helps us to know ourselves in depth and wholeness in interacting with others. Looking at this stand, there is a need to accept plurality and diversity but emphasize on what unites the students. How could this be done? The administrator ought to work towards creating a university culture where all students from different backgrounds can share the university culture embodied in the various activities at campus.

Emphasis is to be put on complete harmony between the cultural and religious dimensions of education, so that students are truly prepared to meet modernity (Benedict XVI, 2009). We want to argue that modernity has come with varied cultures some of which are contradicting those old cultural values. Some negative characteristics in modern culture, both in the area of knowledge and that of action, are identified as subjectivism, individualism and the unlimited affirmation of the subject in Benedict XVI (2009) citing Paul VI.

These characteristics could bring disharmony if not monitored and controlled by education. The administrator's role is to ensure that the young are informed about these truths, so that the knowledge obtained forms and transforms them. This would be in line with what Paul VI asserted that education should unite culture and faith. Paul VI is cited to have argued that —contemporary man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, or, if he listens to teachers, he does so because they are witnesses (Benedict XVI, 2009). Could this also apply to administrators in higher institutions of education? Of course, the young people would listen to administrators who are witnesses to continuous intercultural and interreligious dialogue with other administrators and faculty members.

Cultural Identities and Education

The issue of identity has always lingered in the minds of people since time immemorial. UNESCO (2009, p.7) observes that the —question of identities – national, cultural, religious, ethnic, linguistic, gender-based or consumer-based – is assuming renewed importance for individuals and groups who see globalization and cultural change as a threat to their beliefs and ways of life. A reflection on such a problem is imperative. What would be the case in the institutions of higher education where most students are still in the process of coming to recognize where they belong in all identity related areas?

To respond to such a problem the administrator under whom the youth and adults are charged has a role to play. He/she needs to look for strategies if not in place to facilitate the finding solutions to the above problems. Is it in terms of conferences where some of these concerns are dealt with, or is the emphasis is to put on the integration of some of the issues in the lesson content? This will depend on the analysis of the situation of the respective institution, which the administrator should have done to respond to the need appropriately. All these strategies articulated would eventually take those concerned towards transformation in the way they perceive things and the world.

Education is the vehicle through which culture and religion is conveyed. According to UNESCO (2009), education is described in terms of knowledge, cultural transmission, development of behavioural and social skills, values and attitudes. This makes education key to the understanding of cultural diversity. Again, in increasingly complex multicultural societies, education is the best means to help people acquire the intercultural competencies that would —permit us to live together with - and not despite - our cultural

differences! (p.15). This is why the report of the World Commission on Education for the 21st Century describes quality education as that which promotes: 'learning to be', 'learning to know', 'learning to do' and 'learning to live together'. The report argues that this could only be successfully implemented if cultural diversity is situated at the centre. This new way of looking at education underscores the fact that there is a close link between culture, religion and education. The intercultural and interreligious dialogue is possible with quality education.

The aspect of —learning to be! enables one to become the person needed in the society which is endowed with its own cultural values and practices. This implies taking personal responsibility for the attainment of common goals and the understanding that we hail from different background. The person also gets interested in knowing what other cultures and religion entail such that they make decision on how he/she can embrace what is set before him/her. The process of —learning to do! makes the person more creative to look for solutions to problems posed by our diverse and different approaches to life. Finally, education exposes one to greater opportunities towards accepting that in the world there are differences and one is helped to determine ways of coexisting with others in harmony. This is possible when one develops an —understanding of others and their history, traditions and spirituality! (UNESCO, 1995, p.7).

Reflection on cultural identity in a fluid society marked by great phenomena has dominated the existence of the human race from time immemorial. It has over the years put the traditional concepts of culture and education up for many questions. These have often triggered changes in their formation processes. In order to carry out correct intercultural educational processes, Hon-Tai-Fai (2011) recommends that a critical and ongoing re-elaboration process is needed to appropriate the signs of culture on which every learner's roots are hinged. Therefore, education, urged by the close network of multiethnic, multicultural and multireligious societies that characterize the society today, should develop new ways of carrying out its practice even if this appears difficult for logic of monoculture to disappear. Intercultural educational practices will favour the recognition and re-appropriation of each learner's culture in order to be able to interact with other cultures.

Standardization of culture by stifling particularities and penalizing diversities while putting personal and cultural identities in crisis and creating inferiority/superiority complexes among the learners is one of the products of globalization. Institutions of higher learning are therefore confronted by a set of profound crisis in motion. As a result, educational administrators have before them challenges on self and one's identity, perceiving and living reality to the point that the paradigms underpinning education and culture are almost changed radically. This has in turn put the question of individual and collective identities of learners at the centre stage of educational practice. Most outstandingly perhaps, it has put the traditional concepts of identity crises to the point that both individual and collective cultural identities of the learner has become one of the most urgent and complex concerns that educational administrators must address within the confines of higher education.

It is observed by Suciú *et al.* (2009) that to manage diversity within an organization is a challenging subject. They assert that when dealing with diversity principles within a learning organization, such as multicultural universities things may become much more complicated. This therefore requires cultural sensitivity which according to Bhawuk, (1992) as cited by Suciú *et al.* (2009) is a requirement for success in cross-cultural environments. Cross cultural sensitivity is an important component of institutions of higher learning which draw students from different cultural settings for effective interaction of these same people.

For such an interaction to happen, it is necessary that students are sensitized to be interested in other cultures and be sensitive enough to notice cultural and religious differences. The administrator being aware of the multicultural aspects in the institution is called upon to promote the principle of "cultural respect" (Suciú *et al.*, 2009) which requires respect for all persons involved in intercultural dialogue as individuals, despite their origins and cultural choices. There would also be a necessity to encourage the dialogue through the use of a common language such that no one feels left out in the dialogue given that in language there is the expression of culture as well.

It is the same development that UNESCO (2009, p. 12) asserts that —Languages mediate our experiences, our intellectual and cultural environments, our modes of encounter with human groups, our value systems, social codes and sense of belonging, both collectively and personally!. From such a perspective,

it is good to reflect upon what language institutions of higher education ought to adopt to ease the interaction. The emphasis should be put on the knowledge of languages such as English, French, Japanese, German, Italian and Kiswahili to mention but a few. This ought to be the concern of the individual administrator, to create ways of encouraging all to learn new languages to boost their understanding of others' culture.

Need for Acculturated Educational Practices

In order to constitute the identity of the learner and society, educational practices should be acculturated by taking on the specificity, the dimensions, the characteristics and sensitivities of the society from which learners are drawn. This inculturation will facilitate not only the success of the educational administrator but will also foster the effectiveness of the educational process as a whole. Education has a role to play in promoting the assimilation in a more convincing and consistent way specific to cultural models by reconciling learners to their own culture to avoid the risk of them living their lives in a schizophrenic or disoriented way with an obscured or problematic identity. Cultural tensions do not only affect the dynamics of multicultural and multinational society but also influence educational projects, teaching and academic researches

Youth have greater access to knowledge and education but fewer opportunities to find a job. In a country such as Kenya, education period has not only been extended but considerably qualified although many young graduates still have a rough time getting integrated into the labour market. With increased globalization, there is increased decrease in employment opportunities even as the labour market calls for more and more skills. As a result, many graduates find themselves unemployed after dedicating long years, economic resources and efforts to their professional formation leading to disappointment and loss of confidence in the institutions, which can easily lead to devaluation of the education aspect.

There is a problematic tendency for young people arising from the tension produced between the expansion of symbolic consumption and the restriction in material consumption. Young people are exposed to a broad range of consumer proposals channeled through the social media and youth culture. This implies that a great proportion of the youth cannot benefit from social mobility either because the labour market is calling for more formation, or because they lack access to promotional networks since the democratization of the symbolic image is in close relation with the concentration of income.

Another paradox that the youth face constitutes adaptation to change and social exclusion. In view of globalization that consolidates the institutionalization of change and the centrality of knowledge as the motor of growth, students find themselves in a privileged position. However, upon graduation, these conditions change as they enter the labour market and exclusion creeps in.

There is tension caused by ambiguity between receivers of policies and protagonists of change. The youth are regarded as agents of change yet in reality, in public policies for youth, they are considered vulnerable subjects. Contrary to this view, young people prefer to withdraw into the private sphere of daily life and build new identities, especially through cultural consumerism and communication in general. In this sense, the young generations struggle between institutional dependence and the value of autonomous participation.

Many students have the possibility to have greater access to information but less opportunity to participate in decision making bodies. Thanks to the new information and communication technologies, most students are in the vanguard with regard to the innovative use of these tools. According to United Nations (UN) (2005) young people are mostly the first ones to participate in a significant way in the electronic networks (cyber participation) thereby affirming a certain —electronic citizenship! however, they do not participate much in society's decision-making process. Therefore, a gap is created between greater social inclusion such as access to information, and greater exclusion in as far as leadership is concerned. In fact, this is the mentality and practice of education in most institutions of higher learning which ought to be questioned in order to bring the new generations closer to the educational administrators in the view of efficacious and efficient participation. This paradox develops a sense of the private to the detriment of the public among students thereby fostering a form of individualism as a lifestyle.

The report also shows that there is tension arising from the fact that many young people have more cohesion to the inside, with a total disinterest to the outside. The new parameters of students' cultural consumerism, especially with regard to the audiovisual industry, provide icons and references that enable a great part of them to get together around collective identities and share in symbolic universes. These identity references are often fragmentary, poorly consolidated and ephemeral, and they make students agents of great cultural creativity. This is a rather individualistic culture that has problems in getting harmonized with the rest of the society, especially the educational administrators' world and other authority figures. It is the divide between inclusion towards the inside in terms of values and identity, and exclusion towards the outside.

Self-determination and protagonism on one hand, and precariousness and demobilization on the other is another paradox. From the positive standpoint, growing self-determination is witnessed in the students who are able to plan their expectations and ways in life with greater decisiveness. The markets are interested in students because most of them are young and therefore are guaranteed customers for consumption. However, from the negative standpoint, these very students are not considered subjects of law; they are somewhat stigmatized as potential disturbers of social order.

CONCLUSION

The dynamics of students in institutions of higher education show that they are faced by challenges stemming from varied cultural and religious values and practices. Sometimes they are lost in the problem of cultural or religious identities, which require that they are exposed to different ways of learning to live with others who seem to be different from them. Quality education that enables one to learn to be, know, to do and live with others is the best tool towards transformation of the people at the institutions of higher education. The role of the administrator is possible through education that facilitates intercultural and interreligious dialogue towards a change of mind, heart and attitude towards all.

Multicultural education and dialogue make it possible to appreciate the presence of multi-culturality and multi-ethnicity in the world of education. This would necessitate preparation of a university generation to face the human and cultural transformation and alterations in the world today with faith and intelligence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A critical reflection on the cultural conflictual paradoxes that characterize students' situation in institutions of higher learning allows us to make some recommendations while focusing on their crossing lines common to all students in the contexts of our globalized world. The paradigms have changed and we do not know where we are going: this is precariousness. One can say that with all the dilemmas of globalization, we have fully entered the society of uncertainty (Branko, 2002). In addition, young students of the digital age who are interconnected in a global network have difficulties living their many forms of belonging in a harmonious way. They are often disoriented and lack reference points. Therefore, the quest for identity continues to be a crucial cultural problem because the existential questions remain unanswered: Who am I? Who are we? Where are you going? Why do I exist?

According to Branko (2005), educational institutions must, through the administrator(s) not demonize globalization since as a challenge it cannot be renounced. It is important to accompany students to live with contradiction and face uncertainty serenely; to manage the fragmentation of identity plurality in view of taking it on as the multiple unity of the human conditions.

Young generation of learners should be called upon to handle cultural diversity with an aim of transforming it into an opportunity for reciprocal enrichment, dialogue for personal growth, and the unity of human family. In a world where state-of-the-art informatics and the omnipresence of communication policies present many students with a great need to be educated to a critical sense and intellectual autonomy in order to go from consumption to production and to interact in a critical, responsible way within the great network of interconnection.

To disentangle themselves from the chain of exclusion, young students are compelled to become de facto protagonists in society and agents of change so that when their education in the university is over, they

will be responsible citizens who can accompany other new generations in the process of their personal maturity and social integration.

An education capable of strengthening the conditions that will make possible the emergence of a society-world made up of protagonist citizens committed in a conscious and critical way to building a planetary civilization is a requirement for this planetary era. This paper recommends that educational administrators, mentors and educators should invent a leadership with and for the young people.

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BIO-DATA

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