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International Mindedness in Education: An Approach to Literature

Abstract: In this paper we will explain what international mindedness is, why we should teach it and how. International mindedness could be understood as an interest in problems that require the efforts of different people and nations in order to be successfully resolved. As educators, we not only want our students to be aware of global issues, but to actually care about them. If they are the ones who will lead the next generations as scientists, politicians, or economists, they are the ones who can contribute to the end of certain practices, such as student drop out or global warming. So, as teachers, we have to give them the necessary skills, abilities and knowledge to help them deal with personal and global issues that will contribute to a more tolerant and peaceful world.

Keywords: mindedness, intercultural understanding

The term 'international mindedness' is not new, although it did only start to be used in the field of education not long ago. The rise of this term in education is probably due to the appearance of more international schools in recent years.

Thomas (1996, in James 2005) explains the reason for the rise in international education as a way to "provide lasting solutions to the major problems facing world society". International education was meant to promote "world peace through the development of better world citizens" (Mattern 1991; IBO 1996; Paris 2003; UWC 2005, in James 2005), thereby

enhancing values such as tolerance, respect and cooperation (Mayor, in Peel 1998; McKenzie 1998; Norberg 2000; Hansen 2002; Lam and Selmer 2004, in James 2005). This is due to the fact that we live in a rapidly changing world where the current socio-political climate and the ongoing economic crises have created tensions in individuals of many different societies across the world. The demotivation of our students in class, along with the rise of new technologies, the economic crisis and globalization, has caused a change in our mindsets and in the way we see education today. It is because of this that many teachers and their institutions are trying to develop a local and global consciousness – they are trying to make their students ‘globally aware’, that is to say, internationally minded people (Singh and Qi 2013: 1). There is a belief that international education will provide “more meaningful learning for their students, given the focus on providing them with the linguistic tools and intercultural understandings to pursue global engagements” (Singh and Qi 2013: 2). But what does it actually *mean* to be internationally minded?

In order to clarify the term, we can turn to Ian Hill (2000), deputy director of the IBO in Geneva, who believes that “an internationally minded person is someone who understands that people of different backgrounds hold different views, examines why they hold them and respects other points of view without necessarily accepting them” (quoted in Cause 2011: 36). Therefore, international mindedness could be defined as “an attitude of openness to, and curiosity about, the world and different cultures” (IBO 2015: 6). Hence, we could say that international mindedness suggests “an interest in problems and issues which require the efforts of multiple nations in order to be successfully resolved (global engagement). This aspect adds a ‘global issues awareness’ to IM” (Hreha 2012: 3). So, according to Hreha, one conclusion that could be drawn is that international mindedness “involves looking at other nations from a predominantly economic perspective (...) A focus of this sort leads to IM becoming a preparation of young people for successful competition with others in different regions of the world” (Hreha 2012: 3).

A different idea of international mindedness is the one suggested by the IBO, which defines international mindedness as an aim “to develop

inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect” (IBO 2015).

If we take a closer look at the term ‘intercultural understanding’, we can understand that the term implies more than just ‘being familiar or acquainted with’. According to Geller, international educators should focus on “issues and problems that are trans-cultural as well as trans-national” (2002, quoted in James 2005: 325). Norberg (2000) claims that cultural awareness is important for all teachers, since international education “seeks to build bridges between countries and works consciously to reduce tensions and misunderstandings across nations” (Norberg 1998: 244, quoted in James 2005: 325). Therefore, being ‘internationally minded’ was defined by the IBO as people “gaining awareness of cultures other than their own”, that is, “appreciating cultures and attitudes other than one’s own, and being tolerant and able to communicate with others on a range of topics about which students have already formed considered opinions” (Hill 2007).

So, learning about ‘other cultures’ does not mean having a superficial idea of a specific festivity. For instance, I may know that Irish people celebrate St. Patrick’s Day dressed in green and that they have a memorable parade. But this does not necessarily mean that I am familiar with their tradition, why they do it, how they do it and the people’s feelings towards it. So, if we wrongly assume that by teaching students a little about a country’s flag and food we are teaching international mindedness, then students will only have a superficial grasp of the real understanding of other cultures.

Teaching our students ‘understanding’ means much more than just that. It implies pedagogical, curricular and assessment planning wherein we not only aim to acquaint our students with other values, beliefs, traditions and customs but also give them the opportunity to “explore the grounds upon which people hold them, their meaning for the people involved, and how they are similar to, and different from, comparable beliefs in our own cultures” (Hreha 2012: 4). Now, understanding it does not necessarily mean *agreeing* with it. The aim is to understand other people’s

beliefs and practices before actually judging them. In this way, students can understand that “other people, with their differences, can also be right” (IBO 2015).

But we cannot understand international mindedness without mentioning the IB learner profile attributes – inquirers, knowledgeable, thinkers, communicators, principled, open-minded, caring, risk-takers, balanced and reflective – since these 10 attributes of the IB learner profile are associated with the three key concepts of international mindedness, which are global engagement, multilingualism and intercultural understanding (Singh and Qi 2013). Multilingualism is a key point, since it encourages students to be ‘communicators’, that is, to learn to communicate in a variety of ways and in more than one language, because this is the way to develop intercultural understanding. “Intercultural understanding involves recognizing and reflecting on one’s own perspective, as well as the perspective of others” (IBO 2015: 6). The IB achieves this by “fostering learning how to appreciate critically many beliefs, values, experiences and ways of knowing” (IBO 2015: 6). Global engagement is closely related to the explorations of global and local issues, including appropriate aspects of the environment, development, conflicts, rights, cooperation and governance.

So international mindedness and culture can be taught through our subjects, for instance, language and literature. Students learn a language, such as English, and also the literature associated with it; these are key elements in developing international mindedness. We can choose from a wide range of works that can pave the way to teaching intercultural understanding. We can work through problem-based learning or project-based learning, through GRASPS¹ tasks, see how our students feel about that culture, reflect on it, and see how they act as a result of such understanding. So, as teachers, we are not only pursuing ‘understanding’, but ‘caring’ about it. Through *caring*, we want our students to contribute, in the ways that they can, to the ending of global issues such as global warming.

¹ GRASPS stands for goal, role, audience, situation, purpose and standards.

How can we teach international mindedness through literature?

It is said that learning becomes meaningful when it is experiential and when it is connected to the student in some way, whether it be personally, locally, nationally, internationally or globally. According to Haywood (2007: 86-87), schools that hold international mindedness “as one of its professed outcomes must ensure that ... the learning experience provides for all these areas” – curiosity and interest in the world around us, open attitudes towards other ways of life and tolerance as regards other cultures and their belief systems, knowledge and understanding of the earth as a common entity of value to everyone, a recognition of the interconnectedness of human affairs, and human values that combine respect for other ways of life. In line with the author, “it may ... be possible to draw up content, skills and attitudes that are genuinely universal in these five areas” (Haywood 2007: 87).

If we focus on the study of language and literature, students “will develop an understanding of how language works to create meanings in a culture” (IBO 2014: 4). It also “contributes to a global perspective, thereby promoting an insight into, and understanding of, the different ways in which cultures influence and shape the experiences of life common to all humanity” (IBO 2014: 5).

Below are two practical examples of activities that can be done in a literature class to foster international mindedness.

1. *A Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens

This novel, written by Charles Dickens and published in 1843, is probably one of Dickens’ most popular novels. It tells the story of a man called Scrooge who is greedy and selfish at the beginning of the story, but who changes the way he sees life after a ghostly night. It is a story of self-redemption, compassion and forgiveness, and therefore ideal to work on in class with students during the first semester due to its proximity to Christmas and the fact it has interesting attributes to work on in class, such as being caring and principled.

The main topic of the story is compassion and forgiveness. For this reason, it is important to encourage discussion and reflection. I recommend

that the story is read in class in order to be able to discuss aspects such as workhouses in Victorian times, etc. After reading the story, the class can start with the following question: How can your attitude and personality affect your own personal and cultural development? Students can talk about their own experiences and their own points of view. They can also compare them to the story.

The class can then move on to asking more questions, such as: How does the main character's attitude affect himself and his relationship with others? Students can be asked to identify moments in the novel that reflect the character's attitude of selfishness, for instance, and to identify how the characters react to Scrooge's attitude.

After reading the story and having a class discussion, it is important to 'connect' students not only to their personal life but also to the story. Therefore, students could attend a soup kitchen where they will be able to help people in need and experience the virtue of generosity, something that the main character of the novel lacks. The visit to the soup kitchen would be connected to the question: How does helping others contribute to your personal and cultural development? During the visit, students would be able to reflect on the importance of community service.

However, I believe that 'experiential' activities must go hand in hand with self-reflection. Therefore, students will also do a GRASPS task. The goal of this activity is to have students reflect on their feelings and relate them to the main character of the story, explaining why they think community service is essential to develop good personality characteristics. To do so, they could be asked to write a reflection paper to their local newspaper, trying to convince the editor-in-chief to publish their reflection paper during the Christmas break to make people aware of the importance of community service. The standards for success should be determined by the teacher, but they could include the following: 1) write a reflection paper explaining why you think community service is essential to develop good personality characteristics; 2) make sure your writing is clear and well-structured; and 3) include a comparison with the main character of the story, Scrooge.

Through these activities, international mindedness is being promoted. Students learn to be more culturally aware if they are involved in community service. They are also developing personal character traits such as being caring, principled and reflective. Through the reflection paper, students are not only thinking about the importance of community service, they are also encouraging others to think about it. Through the novel, we can teach our students about the importance of forgiveness and an understanding of others.

2. *Oliver Twist*, by Charles Dickens

Oliver Twist was the second novel written by Charles Dickens. It was first published in monthly instalments that began in 1837 and ended in 1839. The novel reflects Victorian England and the Poor Laws, Victorian workhouses and the way in which impoverished people lived (Lacarte 2016).

Oliver Twist is a story of resilience and self-improvement. Although resilience is not one of the IB learner attributes, it is one of the values that students have to work on and try to develop. In this rapidly changing world, we have to help our students to be resilient, open-minded and able to think independently.

Through this story, students will get to understand how people lived in Victorian times. They will be able to learn about the workhouses and the differences between social classes that existed at the time. The teacher can start by asking the following question: How were people in need helped during Victorian times? Students can discuss the question in class, and they can watch documentaries about workhouses in order to have a better idea of what they were like. The novel clearly describes what life was like at the time, so students can establish a comparison between then and now.

To do so, students could be asked to find out how people in need are helped today. The teacher can ask them to think of the many ways in which their government helps people. For instance, this may be by providing a minimum guaranteed income, scholarships, soup kitchens, etc. Students could establish a comparison between the ways in which

people were helped in the book and the ways in which people are helped today.

As part of the more experiential activity, students could be asked to create a personal project answering the following question: How can we contribute to ending poverty in our community? Students would then have to do research and suggest ways in which they could contribute to ending poverty in their community. These kinds of activities are not only related to their personal life, but also develop international mindedness. Older students could be asked to find ways to contribute to ending world hunger.

Through these class activities and/or projects, we engage students in their learning process. When they are able to construct their own learning, it then becomes more meaningful to them and, therefore, more interesting.

How else can we promote international mindedness in school?

Haywood claims that “international learning outcomes must be identified just as precisely as those we set for mathematics, science, humanities or other components of the traditional curriculum. (...) [W]e really need to include it as a ‘formal’ learning area ... accompanied by assessment strategies and approaches to teaching and learning” (2007: 88).

As we have seen in the practical examples, it is possible to include international mindedness in subjects such as literature. However, it may not always be possible to teach international mindedness in the classroom or through our subjects. According to Cause (2009), the data collected during her investigation suggest that it is quite difficult to expose students to international mindedness when teaching topics such as ‘the human body’, since it is already quite a universal topic. Since the class curriculum is not enough to teach international mindedness, the school community has to commit to it.

One good way of promoting international mindedness within the school community is to organize international tournaments with schools

from other countries. Students would have an opportunity to practice the target language, meet people from different cultures and practice sports. It is certainly a friendly way to get immersed in other cultures and traditions, which will not only enrich their learning experience but will also make them more open-minded. Another way of fostering international mindedness is through community service. By helping others, students become aware of the problems that some people may have within their community, and it will help them become more empathic and caring. Other activities can include celebrating an international festivity in their school. Learning about the country, its traditions and customs and having the chance to experience the festivity can help them understand other cultures and, therefore, other people. Trips are also a good way of promoting international mindedness, because students can experience the culture of the place *in situ*.

Conclusion

Sampatkumar (2007) argues that the role of today's education is to promote positive attitudes in children and teenagers in order to build a future in which diversity will be an asset and interdependence will be the pillar upon which this society is supported. It is our responsibility as teachers to teach our students to overcome difficulties without resorting to violence and to promote peace among individuals and communities. As teachers, we need to create an environment where everyone is respected and valued. We are the ones who should be creating bridges between the different cultures that co-exist in the school community. "Right attitudes are vital to enable present and future generations to cope with the complexities of life fuelled by diversity and globalization" (Sampatkumar 2007: 75).

We need to engage our students in being caring and understanding. We need to be aware of cultural diversity and take advantage of it in our classes. We can create an 'international day' in class in which students present their countries of origin, and organize activities to explore the different cultures and traditions.

By actively involving our students in the different aspects of the cultures of other nations, we are creating an interest that requires cognitive development but also an affective dimension. In doing so, students are also developing appropriate personal attributes such as being caring and principled, as we help them to develop an understanding and cooperation between the students and the community they live in. We must create in our students the capacity “to appreciate the world in which they live, beyond their own city, province or country, and contribute to a better and more peaceful world” (IBO 2015).

As Munro says, “we live in an increasingly internationalizing world. The need to understand international learning is not restricted to teachers in international schools. Our students and our cultures experience information that is increasingly international in its sources and dispositions” (Munro 2007: 125).

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